MONOGATARI SERIES SHORT STORIES NISIOISIN



### maxdefolsch & bluex present

# MONOGATARI SERIES SHORT STORIES

Fan translation project

NISIOISIN

Art by VOFAN and others

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## **PREFACE**

This translation project started in November 2015, when I discovered the existence of the short stories. I was eager to read more Monogatari while waiting for the anime to continue, but I was very disappointed when I saw that almost none of the stories had been translated into English. Surely, for a series as successful as Monogatari, the community must have done everything already, right? It turned out that it hadn't, and the existence of the short stories itself wasn't something widely known.

That's when I had the idea to directly ask the /r/araragi subreddit if people would be interested in translating these stories to share them with the English-speaking community. And fortunately, they were, and a couple of talented people joined me in this project! They are the people I want to publicly thank, because my only role here was to coordinate everything, send messages and find raws, and the real hard work was their doing! Their names are listed at the end of this book.

In addition, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Haremless who single-handedly translated or proofread half of the stories and has always been extremely reliable, and to bluex who helped me put this whole book together with superb editing skills. Without them, work on this project would not have come nearly this far, and making this book would not have been possible. I can't thank them enough for their efforts.

And of course, thank you everyone else for the support!

With that out of the way, let's start with the real content of this book.

maxdefolsch



Monogatari Series Short Stories First edition

## INTRODUCTION

#### So... what are these short stories?

As you may know, the Monogatari Series is a light novel series written by the talented author Nisio Isin starting from 2006. When it received an anime adaptation by Shaft in 2009, it quickly contributed to the series becoming immensely popular, and many kinds of merchandise, such as supplementary books, Blu-ray/DVD sets or figures, have been released ever since. With those are often included short story arcs written by Nisio Isin, in the same style as the light novels and usually named according to the same naming scheme ([first name] [word]), sometimes as a way to expand on certain plot points that were only alluded to in the novels and anime, but more generally just to give extra interactions and fun conversations between the characters as usual.

#### Are all the stories there?

I sort of arbitrarily divide the stories into three main categories:

- The main short stories, the largest bulk of short arcs written in the same style as the novels. Until recently, it always followed the classic [first name] [word] naming scheme, but now it also includes a set of five stories that don't follow this naming scheme but still adhere to a short story format and are visibly related to the main plot, as they directly tie into *Kizumonogatari*.
- The crossover stories, which for the time being comprise Mazemonogatari, a set of 15 longer stories (of which 12 have been released so far) where Araragi meets various characters from other series written by Nisio Isin, and Tsubasa Lion, a crossover with Umino Chika's manga series March Comes in Like a Lion, featuring Kiriyama Rei as the narrator.
- Additional material, everything that doesn't follow a normal short story format, but is written by or told from the perspective of a character.

This tome contains every main short story, except *Mayoi Welcome* which I haven't been able to find anywhere, and of course except the stories that have been published after this book's release, or that haven't been translated yet.

The crossover stories aren't included here, both due to a lack of translations and because they're long enough that they could fill an entire second book on their own.

Finally, while this book contains most of the additional material (interspersed through the main short stories), it omits the transcript of the *Bakemonogatari* Drama CD, *Hyakumonogatari*, for similar concerns of length.

#### Are they canon?

Unless someone can prove me wrong, I firmly believe that all the main short stories are canon. Some of them are plot-related and referenced in the light novels. For example, the short story *Mayoi Room* explains why Hachikuji forgot her backpack at Araragi's house on August 20; in *Shinobu Time*, Araragi actually tells the reader to check out the *Bakemonogatari Anime Complete Guidebook* for more information.

The crossover stories might be different, like taking place in a "what-if" alternate universe. The current lack of translations makes it impossible to say for sure at the moment, but I've read that some of these stories also reference the main plot and so would have a place in the timeline. For the time being, my judgment on their canonicity is reserved.

So my answer is that yes, the main short stories are canon; and maybe the crossover stories are too.

#### I don't want to read 40 stories, which ones are important?

None of them is truly crucial to understand the series, but some of them are indeed related to the plot in some way and are not just funny conversations between our beloved characters. If you must choose, here are the ones that you really should read:

- Mayoi Room: while not really important in itself, it does explain why
  Hachikuji was in Araragi's room and forgot her backpack here
  shortly before the events of Mayoi Jiangshi.
- Tsukihi Eternal, Karen Arm-Leg, Hitagi Neck, Shinobu House: the four stories of the "Gahara Summit", or what happened when Araragi introduced his girlfriend to his sisters after Tsukihi Phoenix.
- Rouka God: when Kaiki came to talk to Rouka about her activities, leading to the events in Suruga Devil.
- Yotsugi Stress: in Tsubasa Tiger, there is a timeskip after Black Hanekawa and Shinobu arrive at the cram school that just burned down. It's then hinted in Shinobu Mail that they met an oddity and fought against it. This story starts at the end of this fight.
- Princess Beauty: presented as a fairy tale, but it's the true origin story
  of the child who later became Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion HeartUnder-Blade.
- As a Human, Something Wrong, And Then, Why, With Caution: a set of Kizumonogatari-related stories, each told in the perspective of a different character.
- Karen Brushing, Tsukihi Brushing: amazingly, it's even worse than the toothbrushing scene in Nisemonogatari. And by worse I mean better.
   So much better.

#### What's the reading order?

If you're up to date with the anime, you should have enough context for most of the stories. Some of the plot-related stories need you to have read/watched until a certain arc to understand (for example, *Rouka God* is a prequel to the events in *Suruga Devil*, and *Yotsugi Stress* expands upon something that's only mentioned in *Shinobu Mail*), but other than that, you should be fine. If you're not sure, just catch up with the anime before getting to the short stories.

You can read them in any order you want since they're almost all independent. Currently, the only exception is the set of four Nisemonogatari Guidebook stories (Tsukihi Eternal, Karen Arm-Leg, Hitagi Neck, Shinobu House) organized in chronological order.

#### What's the chronological order?

As usual with Monogatari, the short stories are all over the timeline. Unfortunately, most of the stories don't have enough indications to deduce the exact date, but some of them are known due to their relation with other plot elements. I have attempted to construct a full timeline of the series before, but it will be omitted in this book as it's mostly irrelevant.

Excluding *Hitagi Throwing* (where Kanbaru explains how she met Senjougahara in middle school), the earliest known story is *With Caution* on March 26 (towards the beginning of *Koyomi Vamp*), and the latest known story is *Tsukihi Brushing*, that takes place after Araragi's graduation.

#### What's next for this project?

As more stories will likely be released in the future (Nisio can't stop writing, after all), and since we'd like to try and improve everything we can, we're planning on publishing future editions of this book at some point. Look forward to it!



Usually I can easily see Senjougahara at school, but seldom do I have time to meet her on Sundays. But shockingly, we met up that day.

Having said that, it's just that she got a free coupon from her father for a cake buffet that is for limited use on Sunday and she suddenly wanted to use it. It's a dessert café that is too expensive for civilians, so in order for the shop to maintain its style, it usually does not take up such pirate-like behavior as buffets, but it seemed to be the shop's anniversary that day.

Speaking of freely eating cakes, when I am standing in front of a counter full of donuts, I can't promise that Shinobu won't appear from my shadow. Of course, she has never come out in front of Senjougahara, and she has also never been moved by anything other than the donuts from Mister Donut (she basically doesn't eat human food), so I can tentatively relax.

If there was any concern, it would be the store's exterior. Boys seem to need a certain degree of courage in order to go in, which made me so angry I stiffened, but I needed to tolerate it.

Senjougahara's mockery doesn't bother me anymore, and the cakes themselves are rich and varied; also the taste is by far the best I have ever eaten, so I don't care about anything else.

Hmm, delicious.

Even bigger things are trivial in front of all this food. The fact that humans are animals dominated by food—I suddenly felt I experienced that truth deeply.

No, it's the same even for vampires.

"Senjougahara. Did you get fat?" I said.

Taking a break, I inadvertently said it.

Although I haven't watched any comedy shows recently, I could still describe the image in the next instant, like throwing a party, a fancy cake flew towards my face.

I don't know if it's for the guests' convenience in eating it or if it was just designed that way, but this piece of fancy cake was much smaller than imagined, it could be said that it was mini-sized, so very luckily, my face and clothes were not dirtied: the cake was directly enveloped by my mouth.

It was a very direct method of eating.

"Huh? You said something that you shouldn't have said? Araragi-kun."

Senjougahara's eyes opened very wide.

Her deadpan look was very frightening.

"Girls don't get fat."

"Oh..... Is that so?"

"Yes. Girls only grow."

Senjougahara placed the fork in her hand and started exaggeratingly eating sections of the cake one after another.

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"This is not getting fat, this is just growing."
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".....)

What an amazing explanation.

"If I keep eating lots and lots like this, then soon I will become two people."

"Scary in many ways."

That explanation is scary, having two of you is even more scary.

"Say, you were too thin before, so if you were to add a little bit of weight now, the extra flesh would be very obvious."

"Don't say the flesh will be very obvious."

Senjougahara was poised, holding the fork.

In front of me, her boyfriend.

..... Something worth mentioning, if it were the Senjougahara from some time ago, then certainly, instead of throwing cake from the beginning, she would have mercilessly attacked me by directly throwing the fork at me. Realizing this point, I felt that she has calmed a lot from before.

But certainly I can't say that she has become very gentle.

"Speaking to the end, Araragi-kun, talking about things like weight in front of a girl, those things are just too sensitive."

"Ah."

Actually that is right.

But seeing Senjougahara eating so happily, I was shocked even as I was drinking black tea, so I wanted to pull her down a notch.

On this steel-skin face, or rather steel-shell face, I wanted to reveal a little flaw in that face.

Basically, I wanted some mischief.

"Although I didn't want to say it, but recently I have gained a little weight."

"Hmm. So it's actually true."

I'd thought it was an illusion.

"Specifically about five kilograms."

"By that much, what!?"

Five kilos!

Isn't that the same as her weight when she was possessed by the crab?!

In this sense, it's the addition of one person's worth.

"What is wrong? It's a popular scenario that's been coming out lately."

"No, that's not the case. If it is the flesh that was coming out then it's really frightening."

"You're really annoying. Be careful of me making your internal organs fly out."

The visceral fats coming out.

I hate this kind of 3D effect.

Ah.

I can't actually tell that she got fat..... But, ah, she gained a lot.

"So would it really be better if you returned to the track and field team? That way you can also stay in shape."

"Well."

Senjougahara really hates things about the past, especially things from middle school, but this time she didn't refute, as if she were thinking deeply about something.

"Let me explain something."

Senjougahara said, while eating cake.

"Being able to eat what you love like this, and also being able to eat until you're full... Until a while ago this was unimaginable. That's why I'm really happy."

"Ah?"

"Think about it. Back then, because of the crab, I—didn't have any weight. So, just like limiting the weight of my clothing, I also had to limit food intake."

Eat too much—you'll get heavy.

Senjougahara said.

"Ah....."

I nodded.

I see.

Because being overly thin—because of this kind of reason.

Ultimately, Senjougahara is considered tall among girls (she's even taller than me). Even though she gained five kilograms, it actually probably is still far from reaching the standard weight.

"Being able to eat what you love until you're full is great. Having a real sense of that love."

Senjougahara repeated that continuously.

"When I love something, I will get a small feeling of being saved. Although, of course, I may be a person who has committed a lot of mistakes—but at least when I see something good is still something good, I still have this kind of emotion, so I am able to forgive myself a little."

"Forgive-"

Being saved.

No—I can understand this point.

Saying I understood... It is better to say I have personally experienced it.

Perhaps, the opposite.

Only after you love something, can you feel like you're being saved, or being forgiven. Only people like me and Senjougahara would have this kind of feeling—

"I like the me who is liking something, or you can say, in love with a girl in love. So, of course, this short phase has a denied meaning—but is there anything wrong?"

This is something from someone who has never hated herself—she said.

"That may be true...... But that can't be a reason for overeating cake. Everything must have a limit."

"That's right."

Senjougahara nodded, but her hands didn't stop.

In the end, Senjougahara's family's economic condition has not recovered, so maybe there's very little opportunity for her to eat this much.

But even if you say I'm crazy, I actually feel, slightly, that girls with a bit of meat are cuter; you can even say that I even want her to gain two more kilograms.

"So are you going to start jogging with Kanbaru?"

"Forget it. That weight loss method can't be followed by ordinary people."

"However, while talking, I found that Araragi-kun can really eat. I'm telling you in advance, Araragi-kun, if your BMI goes over 20, I will ruthlessly break up with you."

"That benchmark is too strict."

20. That is even stricter than the metabolic syndrome.

"Ah, but that should be no problem."

"You seem very confident. Why?"

"No, I only recently discovered it, but this can be regarded as one of the few physical advantages of vampires. A vampire's specialty is the body being able to maintain a sound condition. If it goes over a certain value, it will naturally return to the optimum body weight. That is to say, I won't get fat."

Kala.

Senjougahara's fork fell to the ground.

She bore a stunned expression—by the way, this kind of expression, I have never seen it before.

The expressionless attribute collapsed.

"No, but, this is just a side effect. Not as tight as like Kanbaru. So I can still get a bit fat. So, I'm still very jealous of that person—hmm, Senjougahara-san?"

"How enviable....."

I was harshly glared at.

"This kind of rule-breaking tactic, I will never accept it...... You have this kind of body, and also use this condescending view to judge my weight gain....."

"No, no, I'm not judging you."

"OK, you will see. Araragi-kun who relies on oddities, I'll let you see the possibility of human beings. The parts that I grew, I'll lose it in an instant—I declare it here, Senjougahara weight loss plan activate."

"Weight, weight loss plan....."

So it's not losing fat? A gross exaggeration.

"Ah. I'll start the fight immediately after I finish this meal!"

Senjougahara said, and used her hands to grab the cake, eating it mouthful by mouthful (because the fork just fell on the ground). Then, at an alarming rate she started eating the cake on my plate.

In short, initially, I even worried that she was going to finish up all the cake in that place, but seeing the expressionless her enjoying the mood of liking something, I did not want to pull her down anymore.

As long as Senjougahara is happy, even if I don't eat cake, I will also feel happy.

I thought today was the best day.

...... By the way, as a follow-up story, after that Senjougahara really began training with Kanbaru together, and just like a joke, in a short amount of time she successfully lost weight.

Sure enough, you can not underestimate her perseverance.



TRANSLATION: POLARIS TRANSLATIONS

That Sunday, I was in my room at my wits' end.

"This is bad. What am I going to do? For it to turn out like this... Aah. I can't recover from this. I thought I was an idiot, an idiot, but to think that I could be this much of an idiot... I can't even follow up on this."

Muttering these words of regret almost deliriously, I nervously raised my head and glanced at the bed.

What I thought from that glance was, of course, "it would be nice if this was a hallucination~".

That's right, I wonder if this was just a dream.

Something like this couldn't possibly occur in reality.

"Akirame-san."1

It said.

The hallucination sitting on top of the bed spoke to me.

<sup>1</sup> 諦め (akirame, "resignation")

"No matter how much you pray to be rescued, I'm not going to disappear, and you aren't going to wake up, Akirame-san."

The hallucination.

Rather, Hachikuji Mayoi said.

"... No, it's true that right now there isn't a more appropriate name for me, and I have no choice but to resign myself to the fact that right now it's a perfect example of how names and natures do often agree, but Hachikuji, my name is Araragi."

"Sorry, I stuttered."2

"Wrong. It was on purpose..."

"I stutteted!"3

"Oh, so it wasn't on purpose? ..."

"I stuttired."4

"Well of course you're tired with how many times you've stuttered now..."

I wasn't even in the mood to do the usual exchange.

Well, of course.

At any rate, right now, to an extent that couldn't even be compared to Spring Break or Golden Week, my life had been raised to a critical moment of unprecedented scale.

It made me want to bury my face in my lap.

Hachikuji was in my room.

A fifth-grade girl was in my room.

Of all things.

Now then, for the sake of explaining the current situation, it is necessary to turn back the hands of the clock just a little bit—yes, it was just one hour ago (it's really just a little bit).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 噛みました (*kamimashita*, "I bit", implied "I bit my tongue")

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> 噛みまみた (kamimamita, mispronunciation of kamimashita)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> 噛みあきた (kamiakita) with あきた (akita, "bored")

I had just taken a break from studying and gone out cycling when, in the middle of the road, I discovered the backpack-laden figure of a twintailed, fifth-grade girl.

"Oh, isn't it Hachikuji? It's been a while."

I can only remember up until I thought that.

That is, I was conscious up until that point.

But, immediately after, as if suddenly overcome by something, I rushed up to Hachikuji, grabbed her petite figure, tied her onto the bicycle behind me, and took her all the way home like that.

"... This is abduction, isn't it."

I had become a criminal.

Not to mention it was abduction of a minor.

As far as I know, isn't this one of the worst crimes that humanity is capable of?

"The word 'abduction', it's really easy to stumble over, huh...
Ahaha."

Already my thoughts had turned towards escaping from reality.

My mentality was surprisingly fragile.

"No, it's not my fault... It's because Hachikuji was just too cute... Really, I'm the victim here."

"That's the worst thing to say, Araragi-san."

Wearing that backpack on her back, on top of the bed, with those eyes that said "I always thought you would commit some sort of crime, but you finally went and did it, didn't you", Hachikuji went "haah" with an exaggerated sigh.

"You're being extremely nonsensical as usual, you know~" She said.

"To think that you would take me, a ghost who haunts the streets, and bring me back to your home. Moreover that you would drag me into your room! You're completely disregarding the rules of oddities. Oshino would be astonished at you, not me."

"Eh? But, since you were promoted two ranks up from a ghost that haunts a specific place to a wandering ghost, can't you freely go wherever you want now?"

That was what I had thought.

"The basis for myself doesn't change like that. Like humans, I'm not at that level of freedom. It's just that the idea of 'I won't be able to arrive anywhere', the binding of the Lost Cow is what's gone. I'm just not a lost child anymore."

"Hmm."

"They say that vampires can't enter the homes of others, right? Without the permission of one of the residents, they can't even open the door—well, it's something along those lines. In my case, the streets are my place of residence."

"Hmm... The streets, huh?"

Like a guardian deity for travelers?

I never really thought of it like that, but for Hachikuji, even after the Lost Cow incident, I've only met her on the roads.

"For this kind of spoilery conversation to happen, it's good that we're in a special extra story, right?"

"Don't say something so meta. Er, don't say something so careless.<sup>5</sup> Just try being me, who may very well get arrested because of this extra story!"

"It's fine, you know. I'm only just saying this, but since you only abducted and confined a ghost that's been dead for over ten years, it won't become a crime."

"These days, you never know if it might be a crime..."

After all, there's been trends to protect the rights of characters that don't even exist that have been rising day after day.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Araragi first says メタ (*meta*, "meta") before correcting himself and saying 滅多 (*metta*, "careless").

"Well, isn't it alright? Let's just move on from the fact that it happened like this and leave fortune to the heavens. It's also the first time I get to visit the room of a boy, so let's just call it a room date."

"A room date?"

Hm.

Well, alright.

No use crying over spilled milk, so I'll resign myself to it.

I really am Akirame-san.

"Shall we play cards? Like Rich Man, Poor Man?"

"Oh, sounds good. I'll get my two little sisters, too."

"It's alright to play with the ambulance rule, right?"

"I don't know any local rules like that!"

Rather, Karen and Tsukihi probably won't be able to see Hachikuji (and even if they did, how would I introduce her to them) so I guess we can't play Rich Man, Poor Man.

Hachikuji probably already knew that, anyway.

"But really, Araragi-san, your room is very tasteless, isn't it. Instead of keeping things tidy... How should I say it. I think calling it savage would get to the point."

"Don't say such rude things."

"So, where did you hide your porn?"

"Don't say the same things as Kanbaru!"

"Don't tell me it's under this bed... If you were getting aroused from the fact that you made me sit above your porn, you'd become an exceptional pervert!"

"I'm not that exceptional!"

I'm exceptionally normal!

Not to mention, since my little sisters can invade this room at any time, I would never hide such treasured books in such a standard location.

"Heh. Then, where have you hidden them?"

When Hachikuji asked me, I triumphantly answered while grinning and sticking out my chest.

"This is a little unexpected but allow me to teach you where they are, Hachikuji... Currently, my porn is inside... my sisters' room!"

"…"

I had been completely led on by Hachikuji.

Hachikuji, who had always accepted me while smiling (even after being abducted), now looked at me if I was a genuine pervert.

"Then it's expected that even Kanbaru-san wasn't able to find them... Er, Araragi-san. Um, how should I put it... Could you not come any closer to me, please?"

"Please stop shaking with fear on top of my bed."

This would be terrible in picture form.

"I had heard rumors of a second season or a movie, but if Araragisan doesn't change his character then something like that will be a mere dream of a dream."

"Hmph. Sorry, but I won't throw away what makes me, me."

"You see, what makes you, you, is basically a crime. ... Well, if there's nothing weird under this bed, then I guess I'm fine."

"? Fine with what?"

"That is, getting into bed."

With a heave-ho, she changed her sitting position.

For the first time as far as I could remember, Hachikuji took off her backpack (though she took it off before in the anime), opened it, and began to dig around inside.

"Excuse me, Araragi-san. I'd like to change clothes so could you please turn the other way?"

"Eh, what? Are you joking?"

"I am not."

She told me so firmly.

I reluctantly obeyed.

But changing clothes? Into what? Why?

Speaking of which, earlier when Sengoku came to my room there was the same sort of situation. When I turned around, I thought Hachikuji would be bra-less and in bloomers and got excited, or rather my heart pounded (even if I correct myself it's amazing how the impression doesn't change), but no matter how long I stood she never said "It's alright now".

Feeling like the old man and woman from Tsuru no Ongaeshi,<sup>6</sup> the story of the crane's return of a favor, I turned around, unable to wait any longer.

" "

Hachikuji, having untied her hair and changed into pajamas, was sleeping soundly.

Her backpack off and her hair untied, Hachikuji was—

She didn't look like a snail at all.

She was a very cute girl that suited her age.

"Ah, that's right, she was on the way to her mother's house, wasn't she... That's why she had nightclothes in her backpack."

And she—had walked the whole way.

Ten years ago.

And even since then, she had been walking this whole time.

If that was the case then surely she'd be tired.

"In that case, just rest for a while. Sleep tight, OK."

Because I'll let you sleep whenever you want.

The face of Hachikuji sleeping so peacefully, so happily.

That sleeping face makes me completely happy.

It seemed today was the best day.

..... By the way, later on this crime was discovered by Hanekawa, and I was treated very cruelly after that.

I felt like I could just sleep forever.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> 鶴の恩返し (*tsuru no ongaeshi*, "crane's return of a favor") is a story from Japanese folklore which, as the name and Araragi indicate, is about a crane who returns a favor to a man.



When the day to settle things with Kanbaru finally arrived, it fell on a Sunday. Well, since I don't have a lot of space I won't go into detail, but recently, that girl had ascended to a practically intolerable level. Aside from me, when I learned that even Senjougahara was bothered, I finally decided that the situation had gotten serious. It would be the right thing to scold her as her senior while it wasn't too late.

If I don't show my dignity as her senior at this point, I would be setting a bad example.

And, with that, we had a duel.

I wrote a letter of challenge to Kanbaru.

I really did write it.

With a brush.

For times like these it was important to set the mood and everything, so I even went to a DIY store and assembled all the equipment, and for the first time in a while I rubbed out ink from an inkstone. I wasn't able to write out the characters quite as well as I had planned, and doing so took just about the entirety of my Saturday, but I'd say it went alright.

The designated location for our showdown was a sports center on the outskirts of town, and the event of our showdown was basketball, i.e. Kanbaru's field of expertise.

No, rather than a field of expertise, considering that she's in a class of the national level, you could very well call it her stronghold—heheh, are you saying that I would have had a chance if I had just challenged her in mathematics?

Well

I will defeat Kanbaru in a one-on-one!

"... Huh, Araragi-senpai, you've come looking awfully sporty."

I, who had come to the meeting place enthusiastically and talking big, was greeted by Kanbaru-san, wearing heels and a frilly skirt and a lacy blouse, her hair arranged with a pink ribbon, and though I don't know if it could accurately be called gothic lolita she nevertheless seemed to be wrapped up in a very gothic lolita-like fashion that seemed excessively decorated.

It was a perfect mismatch with her bandaged left arm.

"…"

It certainly contrasted with me, wearing basketball shoes chosen for me by Karen, with shorts and a tank top and even a towel wrapped around my head, but when the two of us were lined up like this, we ended up looking like a cosplay combination.

No no no no.

I myself was fine.

"Er, well, Kanbaru-san. This may be a foolish question, and perhaps it may be a rather absurd question, but whatever might that unusual appearance be?"

Was my thoughtless, clumsy response.

"Were you the type of person that wore skirts and stuff?"

"? I'm always in a skirt, right? For my school uniform."

"You could say that, but ... "

"Well, it's true that I did try to be conscious of my fashion, for once. After all, it's my second date with Araragi-senpai." " "

The letter of challenge had failed to convey its intentions.

This girl was the kind of person who didn't just not listen to what people said, she also didn't read what people wrote to her.

And, my battle with the ink yesterday had been on the level of playing badminton with my sisters, too.

I should've just settled it with a text message.

"But that's my Araragi-senpai. If I were to talk about how sleeveless clothes suited you, I'd probably say they don't. There's a proverb that goes 'you can't shake an empty sleeve', but Araragi-senpai would end up shaking even empty sleeves."

"Is that really supposed to be praising me? Also, I don't remember becoming yours at all!"

"'The Araragi-senpai that has my respect', was what I was abbreviating."

"Don't abbreviate it!"

"I did praise you, Araragi-senpai, by saying you were stylish, but I didn't do so out of complete honesty; conversely, I was only able to say it since I knew you wouldn't misunderstand by thinking I was saying it to compliment or flatter you, but really, there isn't anyone else like it. A person who looks cool with a towel wrapped around his head."

"Then you really weren't praising me, were you!?"

"But coming here all the way from your house in that style takes a lot of courage, so I'm seriously in admiration."

Kanbaru said so with a smile.

To her, she might seriously be trying to praise me, but it also had the effect of punishing me.

"So, what kind of date is it today? That is, what kind of date are we going on, Araragi-senpai?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> 無い袖は振れない (*nai sode wa furenai*, "you can't shake an empty sleeve") is a Japanese proverb that originates from the old habit of keeping one's wallet in the kimono's sleeve, since they didn't have pockets. Therefore, the phrase means something along the lines of "you can't use what you don't have".

"Please, read at least a single line of the letter before coming. Did you think we were going to do anything other than basketball at this sports center?"

"Though I think there are other things that we could do... But ah, I see."

Kanbaru nodded.

"I thought something like this could happen so it's a good thing I brought a basketball with me."

"It wasn't on purpose!?"

She really didn't read to the end.

So we went to the reception desk and paid for two hours (since it wasn't a date we split the cost) to borrow a half court. Even with the two of us it was still a bit too wide.

There was a place to rent sportswear, but Kanbaru said "it's alright like this". If I were to tell the truth I would have told her I didn't think that gothic lolita fashion really suited her all that much, but it seemed that she liked it and didn't want to take it off.

Well.

I felt like I was being looked down on with someone with that fashion as my opponent, but I wasn't going to be too strict about it.

First of all, wasn't it awfully unusual that Kanbaru didn't want to take off her clothes?—Though I don't know if it was going to last.

It'll be too late to say that you want to take them off when my score is double yours, OK?

"Let's see. Since it's a half court, we won't decide offense and defense, and for scoring, shall we go with streetball rules, Araragi-senpai?"

"Go with whatever you want. I'll at least let you decide the rules. Since I'm not going to let you decide to shoot."

"That wasn't very good."

From Kanbaru came an unexpected criticism.

Well, since I was going to be in a position of overwhelming victory soon enough, I should at least be tolerant and allow this much.

Incidentally, as for why I have so much confidence despite the fact that we were battling it out in Kanbaru's field of basketball, you might be thinking it's a bit strange.

Well, I don't need to tell you too much about it, but for one, just after I went to deliver the letter of challenge to Kanbaru's home yesterday, by chance! Really by chance, though I didn't have any special reason to, in exchange for a snack I had Shinobu drink some of my blood, so my body's capabilities had been raised to beyond ordinary, and since it's not unrelated, I guess I'll mention it.

Unfair?

Perhaps.

However, I decided to think that I had simply descended into the evil ways for the sake of my junior, and made the question of fairness become rather ambiguous.

"Now, Kanbaru! Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

And with a dribble, I attacked Kanbaru—and I can't really remember what happened after that.

It was that chronic disease that would overcome me like what happened when I spotted Hachikuji, i.e. that memory loss thing that's been going around recently.

Eh, you mean it's not going around anymore?

Well, I forgot about that too.

What I was certain of was, after two hours, the scoreboard read 120 to 0, and far from a double score, it was showing a skunk.

A basketball skunk, that is.

Was that possible?

"Well, if you called it a whitewash, then somehow it feels like you didn't lose..."

"Araragi-senpai, you're being surprisingly positive, huh?"

Sweating profusely after having moved around so much, Kanbaru spoke to me hanging my head in shame on the court. If you looked closely she was only holding the ball with her left hand. What kind of a grip does she have.

"But really, it's amazing that you were able to play for two hours straight. Although, that might sound like I'm consoling you."

"... If you think that way then you should've gone a little easier on me."

120 to 0.

She had scored one point every minute—if I said it like that, I wonder if it would sound like I had fought bravely to some extent. But even that sounds hopelessly positive, doesn't it. My mind was spinning. As was my vision.

"What do you mean, going easy?"

Kanbaru laughed.

"It's been so long since I could play basketball at my full power, so why would I do something like that?"

"…"

"With my left arm like this, the only one who could be my opponent would be Araragi-senpai, who has the power of a vampire."

Thanks, Kanbaru said.

While she was carrying the basketball in one hand—I hung my head deeply.

I didn't say anything.

Jeez.

Really, she interprets anything and everything to be good for herself, this junior does—the truth is, after being separated from basketball for so long recently you were looking down, and yet you were acting like you were energetic as usual and it was intolerable, and Senjougahara had started worrying, though I only worried for a little bit.

But I was able to see the basketball club's ace play from the nearest of the nearest special seats. I was able to see that dunk that had no forgiveness for her opponent who was a senior, and that vivid, blissful smile that she wore—

Even I was able to feel happy because of it.

Well, to be honest, I really did want to win, but, even so, I suppose today was the best day.

..... By the way, she had so audaciously moved around the court that I had ended up seeing what was beneath her skirt.

Let's just keep that our little secret.



Sengoku said that she wanted me to teach her how to swim, so we went to the public pool that Sunday. I can't even remember the last time I went to a public pool. The pool was a little too far to go by bicycle, so we ended up taking the bus.

"But Sengoku, if you want to learn how to swim, couldn't you just ask Karen or Kanbaru to teach you?" I asked as we rode side by side on the bus.

"I—I guess so." Sengoku faltered slightly. "I would feel bad wasting their time on something so silly."

What's with the lowly attitude? And more importantly, is she saying she doesn't mind wasting my time? I may not look like it, but I am aiming to get into college. I have to study for entrance exams, you know. Time is studies.

"Also, aren't you a good swimmer, Koyomi-oniichan? You said so before, right?"

"Well, I don't want to brag about it, but I'm not too bad."

That was not me trying to show off to a girl in middle school. I am actually pretty good.

"When we were kids my sisters and I would go swimming in the river. They were so impressed by the way I was swimming up and down the river they called me a kappa."8

"That's so cool!" Sengoku nodded with an uncharacteristic vigor. "I hope someone takes my glass ball!"

This girl's sense of humor is really peculiar sometimes... Case in point being that she thinks it's cool to be nicknamed "Kappa." (Actually, I was hoping she would riff on that.) Maybe she is getting it from Kanbaru. If so, I'm going to have to have a little talk with that junior of mine.

"Can you not swim, Sengoku?"

"If you're going to show me how to do it, Koyomi-oniichan... No, Nadeko can't swim."

"What sort of reason is that?" Her reasoning seemed backwards to me.

"I use a kickboard at school for swimming class."

"That imagery barely gets by the censors."

Imagery of Nadeko in general is always risky.

In any case, at some point during our inane conversation, we had arrived at our destination.

While the pool was fairly out of the way, it's not like the bus was taking dirt roads to get there. I don't remember the ride being particularly bumpy, but Sengoku kept bumping into me and leaning on me, and now my shoulder was bothering me. (An unexpected shoulder tackle!) Well, I don't think it will be enough to affect my swimming.

After we bought our tickets, we went to our separate changing rooms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> A *kappa* (河童, "river child") is a demon found in traditional Japanese folklore, said to be the size of a child and inhabiting ponds and rivers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> In the folklore surrounding the *kappas*, it is said that they try to lure victims and drown them. One of their goals in doing so is to gain power by taking their *shirikodama* (尻子玉), a mythical ball said to contain the soul and located inside the anus.

The scent of chlorine that lingered outside of the locker room became even stronger upon entering the changing area. I suppose it was a fondly nostalgic smell. Swimming in the river aside, it had been a really long time since I had been in a pool, let alone a public pool.

Naoetsu High School is really only focused on getting students into college, so I don't even have a school pool to go to. Now that I think about it, I haven't gone swimming since I entered high school.

Remembering this, I was now blanking on how to swim. While I wasn't 100% confident, I figure swimming is just like riding a bike; I'm sure it will come back to me when I get in the water.

I'll have to show Sengoku my stellar flip turns.

While I don't want to be a show-off, I don't see the harm in flaunting one's skills every now and then. Sengoku is one of the few people who look up to me (by the way, Kanbaru is not one of those people), so I need to take full advantage of chances like this.

I changed into the new boardshorts that Tsukihi helped me to pick out at the mall yesterday. I then put my stuff in a coin locker, (the kind that will return your 100-yen coin when put the key back in), strapped the key to my wrist, and headed towards the pool.

There was a shower you walk through to get to the pool area.

When I went through showers like this in elementary school I would pretend to be a monk meditating under a waterfall. Remembering such an embarrassing thing was slightly traumatizing. In front of me was an eight-lane, fifty-meter swimming pool.

Talk about overkill. What a waste of tax-payer money.

There were surprisingly few people for the weekend. However, despite the patrons being spread out all over the pool, their collective attention was focused on one spot. Naturally, my attention was pulled in that direction. To be precise, my attention was drawn to the girl standing there, drawn to Sengoku Nadeko.

It was really impressive that she was able to change quicker than me, being a girl and all. From looking at her, I would have guessed she would be a bit on the slow side, but maybe she is a bit quicker than she looks.

Ah, maybe she was wearing her suit under her clothes the whole time. Before I had time to give the matter any more thought, all of my attention was now fixated on what was in front of me.

"""

If I had to say what I would picture for a scene titled, "Together with Nadeko at the pool," I would have definitely imagined Sengoku wearing her school swimsuit. The fact that this was the first thing I thought of probably means that Kanbaru is rubbing off on me. Well, then again, it wouldn't be that strange to expect a middle schooler to wear her school swimsuit to the pool.

But Sengoku's outfit blew my expectations out of the water. She was not wearing her school swimsuit.

Let me be a little more precise: the suit she was wearing was not a school swimsuit, but rather an extremely revealing string bikini that left very, very little to the imagination. I had never seen a bikini this extreme, even on gravure swimsuit models.

She was practically naked.

Ultra-low friction bodysuits that cover as much of the body as possible to reduce drag are all the rage in the competitive swimming world right now. Whether these bodysuits should be considered legal swimwear was for a big topic for discussion. Whether or not Sengoku's outfit could be considered legal swimwear was also debatable, but for the opposite reason. You might say the design was making big waves in the swimming world. It might be a little mean, but maybe I'll coin the phrase, "A single pebble makes a pond ripple; a Sengoku makes a big splash." <sup>10</sup>

"Um... Koyomi-oniichan."

Sengoku's trademark bangs were tied up and out of the way, probably to make it easier to swim. She was averting eye contact and looking at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> He is making a pun using the phrase, "A stone (一石, *isseki*) dropped in a pond causes ripples", saying "A Sengoku (千石, "a thousand stones") drop make a big splash."

the ground, as usual. She stood there idly, looking rather suspicious. As soon as she saw me standing there frozen midstride I could see relief wash over her face as she shuffled up to me.

The words "Stay away from me!" were dangerously close to slipping out of my mouth, but I managed to hold them back.

"Whoa, Koyomi-oniichan. You're so muscular! How wonderful."

"Ah, oh, yeah." I didn't know how to respond to Sengoku commenting on my body.

Slightly off topic, but this svelte body of mine is a side-effect of being a vampire, so I can't really take any pride in it. It's like I'm doping.

"... And your swim trunks are really cool."

"Ah... I feel bad they're so normal, er, well, they're just something I picked up yesterday."

"Really? Me too. I bought mine yesterday too. What do you think? How is it? I thought I'd try to be a little more adventurous."

"Hmm... Well, it is pretty adventurous."

At a loss for words, I ended up sounding like the captain from Go Go Sentai Boukenger. Actually, her swimsuit was way more adventurous than any of their adventures. Where on Earth did she get her hands on such a suit anyways? I don't think you could find something like that at a department store. Moreover, who the hell sold this to a kid in middle school, anyways?

Unable to look her in the eye, I had to look away from her entirely.

A minute ago I said something that made it sound like everyone at the pool was looking at Sengoku, but in fact nobody was actually looking. Rather, everyone was purposely avoiding looking at her. It was like their eyes were swimming around in their sockets to find something else to look at. How appropriate for a pool.

The public pool is the kind of place where parents bring their kids, so maybe this was like watching TV at the dinner table with your family

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> A sentai series (like *Power Rangers*) where the heroes carry a title containing the word "Adventurer".

when a sex scene comes on. No, it was more than just the awkward eroticism, it was like you were committing a crime by looking, and no one wanted anything to do with it. There was an air of discomfort floating around the pool.

Sengoku was still in the middle of puberty, so her body hadn't quite filled out. You could tell by her visible ribcage and hipbones that the faint outline of her abs was probably not the result of hard work, but rather a lack of meat on her bones. It was hard to look at.

If asked for my honest opinion, I would have to say, "pitiable".

"So what do you think?" Sengoku asked again, this time with a slightly uneasy look in her eyes.

No. There is no way I could say "kind of pitiful".

By the look in her eyes, I could clearly see that she was starting to worry that her huge adventure was turning out to be huge failure. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

This isn't good. At this rate, this episode is going to end up a dark chapter in Sengoku's middle school diary. Telling a girl her outfit is a fashion disaster is definitely going to leave some damage. I'm such an idiot. Why couldn't I understand a timid girl's desire to transform herself into a daring extrovert? Think properly.

I remembered the incident where she was bound by invisible snakes. Maybe it was a good thing that she is able to show off so much skin. In that case, I should praise her. I should compliment her. This isn't the time to be worried about what society thinks of me. I don't care anymore. At this point I wish I would have worn a banana hammock in anticipation of Sengoku's actions.

"Uhhh, it looks really good, Sengoku. You really hit it out of the park. You'll be on the leading edge of summer fashion this year. You could even wear it to your school's pool."

"Hmm. OK, If Koyomi-oniichan says so." Sengoku said beaming.

Her smiling face made me happy too. It seemed today was the best day.

...... By the way, after that—at the pool that seemed to be getting less and less crowded—I made a huge fool of myself in front of the middle school girl that admired me so much.

You see... Vampires can't swim.



TRANSLATION: POLARIS TRANSLATIONS

That Sunday, instead of being woken up by my two little sisters Karen and Tsukihi, I awoke from the ringtone that sounded out when Hanekawa's text message arrived. Usually I would boast of my ability to completely ignore the melody of my cell phone, but there was some merit in waking up at the time, and if I do say so myself I was very shrewd for doing so, because the sender was Hanekawa. Well, as always her message was incredibly formal, and furthermore the length was by no means short, and it needed some time to be deciphered, but if I translated it into a style that anyone could understand,

"Let's go on a date ♥"

was the impression I got.

... No, I'm not kidding.

Don't worry, I haven't gone insane.

So I canceled all the plans I had for that day (this time I'm kidding, since I didn't have any plans anyway) and pedaled my bike towards the designated meeting place.

Hanekawa had, as usual, arrived earlier than I did (and, as usual, was wearing her school uniform. Well, school uniform dates have recently been pretty common).

"He~y! Then, shall we go?"

Like that, with a very comfortable way of smiling, she led the way.

Following along while thinking such thoughts as I wonder where we're going, it'll probably end with us at the library again, but wasn't the library closed on Sundays? But to my surprise, on the way we boarded a train (I left my bicycle at the station), and when we finally arrived, it was a karaoke box that was open in the morning.

"... Karaoke?"

"Yep!"

While I was unable to reply, Hanekawa said "Just the two of us. Three hours, please" and promptly got us through the reception desk. What's with this coercive skill? Rather than a date, it seemed as if she were following a quite boyish date plan, where the guy would be like "Be quiet and just follow me" with a pace that didn't even ask for confirmation or consent, and the girl would be enchanted. I seriously want to follow her example.

And then there was the singing.

Hanekawa-san sang with enthusiasm.

As embarrassing as it is to say, my experience in regards to karaoke was rather slim, or perhaps I should say my body was resistant to the very act of singing a song in front of Hanekawa, so when she got tired of me fiddling with the remote control, she said,

"Then, I'll start.",

and took the mic in hand and began to sing. Because I never input my own song due to hesitation and embarrassment,

"Then, I'll sing again, OK?" "I'll sing again, OK?" "Again, OK?" And with that, it was eternally Hanekawa's turn.

I may as well call it a solo live show.

Though it was a situation that couldn't be helped even if some outsider came and told me "What the hell are you doing?", well, I wanted to hear one more time.

I wanted to hear Hanekawa's singing one more time.

She was so good I thought I would die.

If taking the skill level of singing and adding "I thought I would die" as a modifier doesn't make any sense to you, then let's amend it to "she was so good I thought I would be revived". For me, the vampire who was revived no matter how many times he died, this was certainly the perfect metaphor.

It appears that Hanekawa thought that it was a breach of etiquette to sing songs that other people in the room did not know, because each and every song she sang was a famous pop song that even someone like me would know, even though they were all songs filled with major keys that anyone would get tired of hearing, so I was impressed by Hanekawa's admirable performance.

Therefore, with me listening in ecstasy, there was not a moment for me to even turn the pages of the song book.

I instinctively fixed my posture.

"Thank you very much. Huh? Eh? Araragi-kun, have you still not chosen a song yet? In that case, I'll go again."

"Wait a second wait a second, Hanekawa-san. Even though it's fantastic that you're in such high spirits, just wait for a second."

I stopped Hanekawa's arm reaching for the remote control. If she sang for me any longer, I would be so moved I might actually cry.

That would be bad, right?

"Intermission. Let's have an intermission. Let's calm down for a moment, let's go back to our initial state of mind."

"? Although I'm fine with that."

At last she set down the mic and sat down.

She had been standing while singing.

She was the class rep that would dance while singing.

"But I'm surprised... I didn't think karaoke was part of your image, Hanekawa. How many times have you come here, to be able to let out your voice like that?"

"Eh? No, but this is my first time at karaoke."

(( )

At Hanekawa's puzzled response, I too became puzzled.

"Your first time? Eh, but it's like you're really used to using the remote control, though."

"For this, you can just figure it out just by looking at it, right?"

Hanekawa said so quite matter-of-factly.

Looking at Hanekawa like this, she was probably the type of person that didn't read manuals, either.

Or should I say, a person that didn't even need to read manuals.

"Eeh... But, but, your singing, I thought it was good, but even without something so opinionated, everything on the screen has been 100 points, hasn't it?"

"I don't know, even if you say that. Isn't it made so that it shows 100 points no matter who sings? Like a fortune that only has 'great luck' in it."

"Is that so ...?"

I don't really know about it, but I heard that the grading standard for karaoke had incredibly severe judgement... At any rate, this girl, she can only get 100 points even when it's not a school test, huh.

That's unreasonable.

"It's the first time I've sung by myself in front of others since music class in elementary school, so I don't think I'm singing that well. Really, Araragi-kun, stop flattering me."

"Like I said, it's not like that. What kind of person are you, anyway. Just say that you confined yourself in here yesterday for six hours of intensive training for today's sake and be praised obediently!"

By speaking my mind like this, I was really calming myself down.

Emotion that has gone too far can only come out as fear.

"To begin with, Hanekawa, you weren't looking at the screen while singing, huh."

"Hm? Because, I had the lyrics memorized."

"I'm not trying to find fault in you, but why can't you be normal even at karaoke?"

After I said that, I sighed and fell silent.

Why can't she be normal.

As a matter of fact, for Hanekawa, that was a serious worry she had, and that's why, as a result, it was twice that a cat had rampaged—on Golden Week and just a couple of days ago, twice that nothing could be done to stop the story of the cat from occurring. Why did I say something so careless—but, Hanekawa did not even grant me the time to regret like that, saying,

"That's a good question~"

and nodded normally.

"But I thought hard about what happened recently, and I realized that trying to be normal in itself isn't really normal, right?"

"<u></u>"

"Right. There are no dreams in the objective of trying to become normal."

And that's why I ended up seeing nightmares not once but twice—said Hanekawa, as if telling herself that rather than me.

"Also, normal people wish that they weren't normal, don't they? I've realized now that striving to become normal in itself is something that isn't normal. And now in that matter I've gotten all mixed up, huh. And with that, Araragi-kun, I'm sorry for troubling you with all these things."

Though she seemed like she was joking, for Hanekawa, it seemed like she truly thought so from the bottom of her heart as well. "Though I don't think I've done anything wrong up until now—but I don't think that was a good thing. Being nothing but right all the time isn't really the right thing. I don't want to shut myself out anymore, and as it is, if

I don't demonstrate more of my individuality, then one day I may fall prey to the cat again."

"... That's true."

Yes, it could happen.

After all—the cat was like another Hanekawa, and to go further the cat was Hanekawa herself, and no matter how many times we borrowed Shinobu's power to repel it, it will never disappear from within Hanekawa.

Oshino had said that 20 years old was the standard—but Hanekawa couldn't just wait until then.

All the way until then—and all the way after that.

Hanekawa definitely had to face the cat inside of her. Not shutting it out—but accepting it as part of herself.

"So it's something like that, OK? From now on, instead of storing up all this stress and resentment, I'd like to try various ways of stress relief from time to time. And today's the first for that."

"Hm. Ah, that's why."

That's why we came to karaoke.

Singing out in such a loud voice could certainly serve as stress relief.

"What, so it was just that? You should've just told me that. I was so sure that this was supposed to be a date, so I was feeling really happy."

"I never wrote anything like that in the text message, though."

"Is that so."

"You were reading too much in between the lines. I wouldn't do anything like that when you have Senjougahara-san."

said Hanekawa, smiling.

"But, you're right. I probably should have just told you earlier. I mean, I could have just come on my own, but really since it was my first time it was a little scary."

"Oh, so you do get nervous. So it's the same for Hanekawa, huh. Well, I get what's going on now. Whenever you want a distraction for some stress relief, just call me. Like today, I'll come along any time."

"Really? Is it OK?"

"Of course. Would I ever turn down a request from Hanekawa?"

"Then, I wonder if I should request something right now?"

And saying that, from a cute pouch (that didn't really match her school uniform) that hung from her shoulders, Hanekawa took out a pair of scissors used to cut hair.

"This has absolutely nothing to do with Araragi-kun, but recently my heart was broken. So in order to get over that,"

She spoke with a smile.

"These braids, could you cut them off in a single stroke for me?"
""

It appears that that was the main point of today.

Incidentally, you could say that the source of Hanekawa's stress could be me, as well.

For the sake of stress relief you'd need to do some severe action, and I guess this could also be revenge for my harassment, but anyway, the impish, catlike smile that Hanekawa gave as she handed me the scissors seemed, though not completely, just a little bit like she was enjoying herself, and that she was happy.

Because she made me happy as well, I couldn't help it.

Today was, as I thought, the best day.

..... By the way, it wasn't just some temporary joke: Hanekawa really had me cut her two braids. She forced me to give her a bob cut. I couldn't believe it. So as to not bother the shop, she had even prepared a hand cleaner in advance, so this was clearly premeditated. Although Hanekawa of course went to a proper hairdresser afterwards to straighten things out.

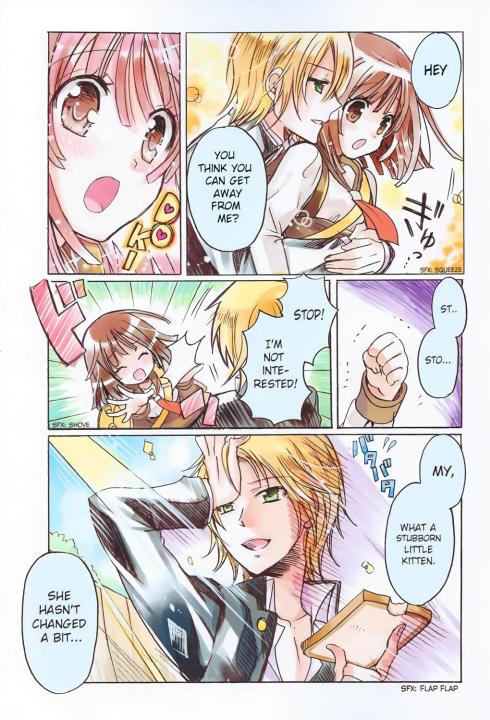
But those two braids are still in my room now.

















SFX: EMBRACING

















It seems like I had forgotten about what kind of personality Araragi Tsukihi had. Even if I had, let's see, gotten careless after winning (?) against Kagenui-san and Yotsugi-chan in our battle, as everyone who's listened to the anime CD dramas must know,

"At the end of the summer holiday, I want to introduce my girlfriend to you."

is something I should never have said no matter what to my little sister with her personality. Especially knowing there's no way she'd wait until the end of the summer holiday if I told her anyway.

"How long."

Tsukihi said.

She had me kneeling on the floor of her room as she asked me. More importantly, she had her arms crossed in a terrifying pose looking over me.

"How long were you planning to wait to tell me that."

"Well, how long..."

She was terrifying.

As to what exactly was so terrifying, my little sister was already holding an awl in one hand. You better hurry up and put that back in the toolbox or they'll start selling it in a set with your figurine.

Of course, that awl may as well have been a toy after fighting against Kagenui-san. The problem wasn't the awl, but the fact that my little sister was holding it and standing over me with her arms crossed itself was terrifying.

And the fact that Tsukihi was poking her own arm with the sharp end of the awl also was a bit scary. She was just scraping against the skin so there was no blood, but I could feel the pressure radiating from her just looking at her "Can you tell that I'm annoyed now" sort of pose.

"You had a girlfriend? The hell were you thinking taking my first kiss when you had a girlfriend?"

"You should watch your language Tsukihi-chan. You're a girl so you should be a bit gentler with your words or people will look at you funny."

"O brother of mine, how durst you have been to place your lips against mine and take my first kiss, when there is already another woman who waits for you."

"…"

Durst you have been? That doesn't quite sound right.

I wanted to tell her that, but I would probably end up with an awl stuck in my eyeball if I did. No choice, I decided to ignore it.

"I'm not sure that really counts as 'gentle'..."

"You takie my fiwst kish?"

"Fiwst kish."

Hearing her trying to sound cute made me even more afraid of the awl... Wow, awls sure are something.

It seems like they can just take any sort of character and completely overwrite it... Of course awls should only be used the way they were supposed to.

"Let me think, are you supposed to use them to chip off ice to put in your whiskey?"

"That's an icepick. Don't mix them up."

"They look almost the same though..."

Don't mix them up with a gimlet either.

"About the same as somen and cold noodles."

"How long."

Tsukihi must have realized I was intentionally saying something she could easily comment on to try and change the flow of the conversation, so she forced it back.

"How long were you planning to wait to tell me that."

"W—Well, you see, I was planning to tell you by the end of summer holiday... I mean, tomorrow! I was going to tell you tomorrow. Come on, Tsukihi-chan, you just had to ask about it. You ruined the surprise party I was planning."

"You were going to have a surprise party to tell us you had a girlfriend... Do you think you're some celebrity? Oniichan."

Ha, Tsukihi-chan mocked me.

That wasn't cute.

"I bet you just told me because it happened to slip out or you just felt like it and by tomorrow you won't even remember you promised to tell me."

"I—Isn't that a bit prejudiced... Have I ever broken a promise with you?"

"I don't think you've ever kept one of your promises. Or kept your little sister safe."

"I have kept you safe before!"

I just did today!

I did everything I could today to protect you, I even died a few times... But it would be hard to tell her that here and now.

"Have you? When was it? When was it? What time, what minute, what second, whatchamacallit, how many times did the Earth spin?"

"Guh..."

It's so frustrating!

Why can't I even win an argument against her!

"When did you even start dating? And when did you start keeping that a secret from me? Didn't we decide we wouldn't keep any secrets between us anymore?"

"I'm pretty sure we aren't two kids who made that promise while supporting each other as the only people we have left to depend on after our parents died..."

After putting that out there, I said

"Since Mother's Day."

"Mother's Day? Hahahahahahaha!"

Tsukihi burst into laughter.

Because it's Mother's Day, so "hahahahahahaha".12

That wasn't even funny, and that laugh made me shudder.

"I see, I see. So after you had that fight with Karen-chan you ran out of the house, and while the whole Araragi family couldn't even look each other in the eye, you were out there picking up some chick?"

"'Picking up a chick'..."

Couldn't you have put it in a nicer way?

Actually, why are you saying "the whole Araragi family"?

I'm part of the family too you know.

"What? That's what you were doing isn't it? On Mother's Day of all days, on that day of celebration that only comes around once a year, when we were supposed to be showing our mom our gratitude, you were flirting with some girl weren't you? You chose some young girl over your family."

"I can't believe what a bad kid you turned out to be..."

'Some young girl'? Well she is young.

She's in the same grade as me so she'd be 18.

"I bet Karen-chan's going to be so disappointed when she hears this. She was so happy because she thought you'd actually grown up a little

<sup>12</sup> The Japanese word for "mother" (母) is pronounced haha.

after you apologized to her, but it turns out you were so careless because you were happy you got yourself a girlfriend."

"How would you know I didn't care? Don't just decide that for me!"
"It was a celebration but you turned it into a carelebration instead."
"Damn it..."

She thinks she can just say whatever pops into her head because she's holding an awl.

"So since then you've been keeping us in the dark about it the whole time? During breakfast and dinner, you never told me that you had a girlfriend. You were just thinking about how much better the food tasted knowing that I was completely in the dark about your girlfriend and secretly laughing at me in your head weren't you."

"Do you really think that there's an older brother out there who would do that?"

"You! You nonexistent big brother! How could you keep a secret from me! I knew it, you haven't been wrestling with us when we fight because you're saving yourself for your girlfriend!"

"It's not like I wrestle with her anyway... And besides, even if I was just careless because I was happy, it's because I met a fifth-grade girl, not because I got a girlfriend."

"How long!"

Was the gist of the conversation as Tsukihi kept asking me about my girlfriend all the way until the morning.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Tsukihi previously called Koyomi "careless" (おざなり, *ozanari*). Here, she says オザーナリー (*ozaanarii*) to make it sound like アニバーサリー (*anibaasarii*, "anniversary").



Araragi Karen is quite tall. In the sense that she was simply tall, without needing any sort of explanation or sidenote added such as "for a girl", or "for someone in ninth grade" or even "compared to her brother", she was just tall. And even scarier than the most terrifying ghost stories is the fact that even now she's still growing. Setting aside these feelings of terror and fear, these emotional problems, and investigating the "condition" of her height, logically thinking it follows that both her legs and arms are quite long as well.

Like the two youkai, Tenaga and Ashinaga.14

I was a bit traumatized when I saw a program about old legends in Japan as a kid. And Araragi Karen could be called a physical embodiment of the two youkai in one. You could say it boils down to her having long

 $<sup>^{14}</sup>$  A pair of monsters in Japanese folklore. Ashinaga (足長, "long legs") has really long legs and short arms, while Tenaga (手長, "long arms") has long arms and short legs. Tenaga often sits on Ashinaga's shoulders.

arms and legs, but now she was swinging those rather long arms and legs around wildly.

She shouted and cried out.

Spread out on the floor like she was making a snow angel.

She swung her limbs around to their fullest extent and writhed on the floor. "Writhed" might have been a more eloquent way of putting it, but in fact it sounded more like "bang" or "crush" or "snap snap snap", sounds of various things being broken. With every flailing of her arms and every kick of her legs, something else would break.

It was like the coming of a great god of destruction.

I assure you that I'm not exaggerating at all, but if it still feels like this is all an exaggeration, I would dare to put it this way even if it isn't quite true. Simply speaking.

Araragi Karen.

My little sister was having a temper tantrum now.

And a huge one at that.

"S—Stop it already, Karen-chan! Karen-chan, calm down!"

But my words would never reach her.

Actually, they probably did, but they had the opposite of the intended effect of calming her down, and she in fact began shouting and worked herself into a greater rage as if to block out my voice.

"You're lying to meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! You have to be lying to meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Bang.

Crush.

Snap snap snap.

This was all taking place in the living room of the Araragi house, in other words one of the most important facilities of a house. However, Karen paid no attention to that and went on breaking things, and more things, and more things.

Those long arms and legs like a youkai weren't to be taken lightly.

I could still look on the bright side and say that at least this hadn't happened a bit earlier, or else the living room would have faced the added destruction of her ponytail as well.

"C—Calm down Karen-chan. Come on, stop crying, stop shouting, stop throwing things around. You're already in your last year of middle school, next year you'll be in high school. You're acting like a kid crying over some dropped ice crea—guha"

I was thrown back by Karen's fist, more accurately her backhand, as I tried my best to stop her from struggling.

That punch might have been fatal if I didn't have the increased healing factor from my vampirism. I was pretty lucky that I had just let Shinobu suck some of my blood too.

Man, being immortal really is convenient.

I won't even die from my little sister's tantrums.

"'Waaaaaaaa'? Have you ever heard anyone cry like that outside a manga?"

"It's a lie!"

She hadn't exactly calmed down, but since the start of her tantrum it was the first time anything resembling speech had come out of Karen's mouth.

"It's a lie! There's no way you have a girlfriend, oniichan! I don't believe it! I'm never believing it! You'd never get a girlfriend!"

"You're my oniichan! You don't need a girlfriend! You were just going to live alone for the rest of your life!"

Wait a second.

What do you mean alone for the rest of my life.

"Waaaaaaaa! You betrayed me! You were my oniichan and only mine! It was just the two of us, brother and sister!"

Karen quickly brushed off Tsukihi's very existence.

I'd like you to understand that's how agitated she was right now.

And I think you understand the situation now.

Near the end of summer holiday.

I turned to Karen and, like I told Tsukihi, told her

"You know there's actually this girl I've been dating since a little while ago."

And before I could say "I'll introduce her to you when we get a chance" Karen crushed (!?) the dumbbell she had been training with up until a moment ago with a bored look on her face, opened her eyes as wide as they would go and immediately flipped over the sofa she was sitting on as if to crush it to bits.

And with those two arms and legs.

She unleashed her two arms and legs which were long like the Amazon river and started throwing a tantrum.

"Break up with her! Break up with her! Break up with her right now!"
"You sure ask for a lot..."

"Call her right now and break up with her! I'll call her if you can't! I'll tell her you can't go out with her anymore because you love your little sister so much!"

"Damn she's scary..."

I'd never seen this kind of little sister character before.

Araragi Karen used to be the classic example of the "real life little sisters aren't that cute" character. And that had now reached its peak.

What kind of crazy fantasy has a little sister who would make her brother break up with his girlfriend.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! How could you get a girlfriend, oniichan! And you kept it a secret from me!"

"This reaction was way more than I expected..."

I guess for all how much she's trained her body, she completely neglected to train her mind... So she kept on destroying the floor of the Araragi household.

I was ready to get punched, but I never expected her to cry and throw a tantrum...

"Tell me what I'm doing wrong!"

Karen sat up suddenly and glared at me. Her face was covered in tears.

"If it was something to do with sex why didn't you just do it with me!"

"What the hell, that's scary! What she says and what she thinks!"

"I can't believe you already had a girlfriend when you were brushing my teeth like that!"

"I know how people bring that up a lot, but if you really think about it, it was perfectly wholesome, just a brother helping his little sister brush her teeth!"

"Let me see her! Let me see your girlfriend!"

Karen said, choking back her tears.

While still wildly flailing her limbs around.

"I'm going to brush her teeth! I'm going to brush them till they're sparkling clean! I'm going to make sure she knows that I'm the only one allowed to have her teeth brushed by you!"

"..."

Whatever.

You are actually the only person whose teeth I've brushed—in any case.

That was how I became the mediator between Senjougahara and Karen. I don't care what happens afterwards, whether they bring a building down or cause a landslide, although considering they are the Fire Sisters, it's more like whether they burn a building down or start a forest fire.

Karen's tantrums continued on after that.

And all there was to do was patiently wait for them to end.



Apparently Senjougahara Hitagi had been waiting eagerly for this day to come. As to what "this day" means, it would be the day when I introduced her as my girlfriend to my two sisters, Araragi Karen and Araragi Tsukihi.

"Why were you so excited about today anyway... Are you actually a big fan of the Fire Sisters?"

Now that I think about it, Senjougahara did know about my sisters before she met me. Of course, at the time, I was just terrified that someone I didn't know knew everything about my family.

"You could say that, Koyokoyo."

said Senjougahara.

Apparently "Koyokoyo" was referring to me.

I was absolutely opposed to that nickname. Actually, it was more than just being opposed to it, I hated it, but she stubbornly refused to stop calling me it.

Well if I just told myself that her stubbornness is just another part of her rehabilitation, if I just forced myself to think of it that way, I could just barely put up with it.

Or maybe it was her way of getting back at me for when I call her "Gahara-san" once in a while.

If that's the case, I guess it's a pretty cute way of getting back at me, I hope that I'm not just rambling on about our lovey-dovey couple moments.

"When I hear the rumors about them it reminds me of me and Kanbaru back in middle school."

"Hmm, the Valhalla Combo."

"But it's not just that, I'm really happy that you're introducing me to your family, Koyokoyo. I feel like I'm finally being accepted as your girlfriend."

"'Accepted as your girlfriend'..."

Did she really say that?

She's gotten a lot gentler than I expected, even after her rehabilitation.

I wouldn't say that I really want the old snappy Senjougahara back, but this really makes it feel like time flies.

"Weren't you happy when I introduced you to my father, Koyokoyo?" "Yeah, I was."

I answered so quickly it might have sounded suspicious.

Senjougahara's father.

Mr. Senjougahara.

How would I describe my meeting with that man who was aging quite well, memorable? A bit traumatic? It really had been unendurable, which was probably why I answered so quickly.

Although now, when I think that Senjougahara trusted me enough to introduce me to her father even before her rehabilitation, it does make me quite happy.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't.

But I'd also be lying if I said it was all just happy times...

"That's why I'm so happy that I'll get to meet Karen-san and Tsukihi-san. Although I still felt like it was pretty out of the blue when you called me up right after I got home from Bon."15

"Well there are some pretty complicated reasons behind that, mysterious reasons you could say, in any case I didn't really have any other choice so..."

I really didn't have any other choice.

If you want to read more about that, you can refer to the other short stories in the booklet, but it was a bit hard to explain to Senjougahara.

"To be honest, my sisters forced me to."

"Forced you..."

"You better watch out, Senjougahara. They seem sort of opposed to you. I never introduced you to them before because I was afraid that you'd try to hurt them. Well I'm not worried about that anymore, but now I'm worried the opposite might happen."

"..."

"Just for today, Senjougahara. I authorize you to arm yourself with your stationery."

Senjougahara shook her head.

"Stationery is for studying, not for hurting people."

"... Well you're right but."

"I'll never write 'stationery' as 'stationary' like a 'stationary turret' again."  $^{16}$ 

"I've never seen you do that before..."

And actually that's a really good pun.

Why didn't I think of that?

"You know, Araragi-kun,"

Senjougahara paused, then said

"I've always wanted a little sister."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Bon (盆) is a festival that starts on August 15 where people honor their ancestors' spirit.

 $<sup>^{16}</sup>$  The original pun is Senjougahara replacing the character 房 (bou) in the word 文房具 (bunbougu, "stationery") with 防 (bou, "defense").

"... I can't give you one you know?"

"I don't mean in real life, it was just a wish for me. Maybe that's why I always liked the juniors like Kanbaru so much. But with my parents ending up the way they did, that's not possible. But I still think about it, maybe if I had a little sister my family wouldn't have been torn apart."

"...)

"Maybe if that was true, I could've introduced you to my mother. Well just introducing you isn't really the point..."

"I get what you're saying."

Actually, maybe I don't.

Just because she's my girlfriend, because we're boyfriend and girlfriend, doesn't mean that we can understand all of each other's feelings. But I know for sure that Senjougahara must have always wanted to have that sort of normal conversation.

To be normal.

To Senjougahara, who had to go through her youth never being allowed to be normal, maybe just spending our days like this is enough to make her happy. But that doesn't mean she'll be able to take back the things she's lost.

Exactly because they're things that she's lost.

She'll always keep thinking of them.

"I know that just a little while ago I never would've thought that introducing people to my family or being introduced to someone else's family would make me so happy. I'm sure I would've thought that even if I had a boyfriend, I'd want that to be just a private relationship between the two of us."

"I know..."

Honestly, I would consider myself one of those people.

But now I guess I'm laid back enough to just go along with what Senjougahara wants. The Araragi Koyomi who used to say "I don't want friends, I'll get weaker as a person" is gone.

And I'm sure who I am now.

One day he'll be gone too.

"I just wanted to ask you, Koyokoyo. Both of your sisters have boyfriends, right?"

"That's the first time I've heard of it."

"Come on, there's no way you wouldn't know... Besides you're the one who told me after all. You haven't met them before?"

"Yeah, I always run right away."

"Why do you sound so proud when you say that. You should just agree to meet them, next time it'll be you meeting your sisters' boyfriends."

"Well if I get the chance..."

I pray that I never do.

Honestly I hope that they break up before I ever have to meet them. I know I'm being close-minded, but that's just how an older brother feels about his little sisters' boyfriends.

Well if I think of it that way.

No matter how hostile Karen and Tsukihi are to meeting Senjougahara, they're way more mature than me.

"Oh, seems like we're here."

"It'll be my first time going inside."

After a fifteen-minute walk from where we agreed to meet.

Senjougahara and I had arrived at the Araragi house.

Let the Summit begin.

I steeled myself for the worst.



TRANSLATION: HAREMLESS

It was only on the night after the meeting held in the living room of the Araragi house between the couple; Araragi Koyomi and Senjougahara Hitagi, and the Fire Sisters; Araragi Karen and Araragi Tsukihi, later to be known as "Gahara Summit" had ended, that Oshino Shinobu appeared, seeming rather displeased.

Shinobu, who despite being nocturnal by no means would always appear at night, did in fact appear as if it were the most normal thing.

Almost as if waiting for the exact moment when I decided to fall onto my bed with a sense of relief after more or less successfully making it through the actually extremely difficult meeting.

"Aaaah"

The tired-sounding voice came out of her mouth as she crawled out from the shadows.

What's with that voice.

It's like she wants me to pay attention to her.

"I could barely watch that. Pretending to be friends, pretending to be family. I hate that stuff the most."

"Uuugh."

Oh boy.

I've got another young lady with a "charming" personality on my hands now.

I never would have guessed that there'd be a bonus level after completing that serious discussion of ours.

"You can pretend it was so much trouble for you, but I saw you with that grin on your face trying to get the conversation going between your girlfriend and your sisters. Aaah, I can't stand it, I simply can't."

Shinobu said, criticizing me not directly, but indirectly, disguising her rant as her talking to herself by shrugging and stretching out both of her arms in an overexaggerated motion.

Mumbling on and on, complaining on and on.

"To see the warrior who drove me so close to the edge grow so soft. Why don't you just get your own soap opera already. You don't belong in any youkai stories anymore. Go on spouting that tepid crap to those girls all you like."

"You sure say some feisty things..."

And even during spring break I didn't even do that much to her. Now she's starting to make stuff up just to get at me.

"Aaah, I don't even know anymoooore. I guess in the end your family and your girlfriend or whatever is more important to you after aaaall."

Shinobu continued without even glancing my way. It almost seemed like she was just talking to herself, but loud enough that I would definitely be able to hear her. Like she was trying to implicitly say "Can you even call yourself a vampire doing all this?".

"What was that again, I remember you saying something. That's right, I remember you saying some really cool line. Man, that made my heart beat sooo fast. I can't imagine someone who'd say they cared about their girlfriend or their family saying something that would get my heart beating sooo fast."

"W—What are you talking about?"

"'If you die tomorrow, I'm fine with my life ending tomorrow too' or something, or were you just trying to sweet-talk me."

Since she had answered my question, it seemed like she wasn't just talking to herself after all. But still Shinobu refused to look my way.

"But from what I heard at that meeting you just had, it won't matter whether I die. You'll just go on living your normal life. I'm sure. 100%."

"Well, actually Shinobu-san. That's not true really..."

"Then die right here right now. I'm already dying from a disease right now so hurry up and die. You can't? You can't, can you. There you go, liar."

""

Just like the 8-year-old she looked like.

But actually, this is kinda cute in its own way.

"Just listen to me, Shinobu. That's not how it is. I know that maybe I was hard to watch today, but I wasn't trying to ignore you."

For some reason I started to try and cheer up Shinobu. I was forced to. Why did it end up like this.

"I thought it was obvious, your bond with me is the most precious thing in the world to me—"  $\,$ 

"Ha, that's what all men say when they're cheating. Well fine! You must be the modern version of the main character in *Life of an Amorous Man*"

17

"There's no way you've heard of that book before. I bet you're just guessing based on the name."

Actually.

Even if you don't know about the book, the title already tells you enough anyway.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> A novel written in 1682 detailing the numerous sexual exploits of a man named Yonosuke in several short stories.

I actually found it pretty interesting that Shinobu in her blond little girl state would know about the famous works of Ihara Saikaku.<sup>18</sup> I wonder where all her knowledge even comes from.

Normally Shinobu just spends her time inside my shadow, and apparently it's a pretty large space so she spends her time reading or playing games... I'm starting to wonder what kinds of books Shinobu reads.

"How about this, my master. If I, your girlfriend, your giant sister and your minuscule sister were all hanging from the side of a cliff and you could only save one of us, who would you save?"

""

She's so goddamn annoying!

This little brat's so goddamn annoying!

I felt myself straining under the weight of how annoying she was and said

"I don't think I could make that choice. Everyone's life is equal so there's no way I could choose between them!"

trying to act cool while dodging the question by giving her lip service.

"Stop trying to act cool while dodging the question by giving me lip service."

said Shinobu, evidently unsatisfied with my answer.

I don't even know what to say after she just saw completely through my plan and threw it right back at my face...

"Answer me. Who would you pick? I might have to leave your shadow depending on your answer."

"Can you even leave it...?"

-

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 18}$  Famous Japanese poet from the 17th century. He created the "floating world" genre of Japanese prose.

"Of course I can. I just so happened to stumble into your shadow and started living there anyway. You could say I'm like Odysseus in Circe's mansion."  $^{19}$ 

"I guess that explains why you have all those books..."

In reality, those were just books she took from my bookshelf. But if there really was a bookshelf you could just keep taking from and there would always be more books, that would really be heaven to any bookworm. Anyway...

Hmm.

What should I do about this.

In any case, I should just tell her "Shinobu, obviously I'd save you even if I had to leave Senjougahara and Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan behind, even if I had to use them as a shield, obviously I'd save you!" and get myself out of this question for now... But really.

When I'm already talking to someone with this kind of mindset, I'd really just be giving her lip service, or trying to act cool, or dodging the question... and then she'd see right through me—I mean throw a bunch of false accusations at me and say "Ha! You're trying to sweet-talk me again!"

So, where does this leave me.

Well, there is only one model answer.

"I would reach out to"

I said.

I said with a posed look on my face.

"Hanekawa. Hanekawa Tsubasa. If I really was in that kind of situation, I'd reach out to Hanekawa—and ask for her help."

""

Shinobu looked at me with an astounded look on her face for a little while, then afterwards

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> The original line compares it to a *mayoiga* (迷家), a house which was said to bring good fortune to travelers who visited it. Circe is a sorceress who provides for all of Odysseus' worldly desires during a year he spends feasting and drinking before he resumes his journey back home after the Trojan War.

"Ka ka"

She began to laugh.

She finally laughed.

"Well if you mention her I guess I have to agree. It really is convenient for you to just pull out her name."

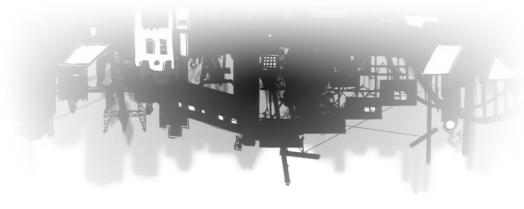
But really that was just another way of getting myself out of the question, and in terms of who I save or don't save, even if I get someone else's help, in the end people can only save themselves, and people can never save other people. Maybe I wouldn't be able to save any of the four, or five, of them, but at least for the time being I managed to stop Shinobu from leaving—and from then on just like before,

Shinobu would keep living in my shadow.



Today we'll be having Black Hanekawa tell us the horoscopes for not the twelve zodiac signs, but the twelve cat zodiac signs.

First off, pick your favorite story from *Bakemonogatari I* to *Koimonogatari*. That'll be your cat zodiac sign, once you've got it, sit back, relax and let off all that stress that you've been building up!!



# If you picked Nekomonogatari Kuro

#### Cat

You got some pretty good luck. Cats tend to stay close to humans, but keep a certain distance so they're not very consistent. However, if dogs are man's best friend, cats simply exist alongside humanity. Staying close but not too close is a purrfectly fine way to live.

# If you picked Bakemonogatari II

#### Lion

Apparently, some people like to point out that Aries and particularly **Taurus** are masculine signs. But what's the point of that? For lions, the males have majestic manes while lionesses have sleek bodies. You're cool the way you are so you should just stay that Did something good way. happen to mew recently?

# If you picked Nisemonogatari II

### Lynx

There are endangered species of wildcats out there. They're in big trouble so you better help them out. Don't think you can selfishly live your own life! I will say that "lynx" has a nice ring to it and I'm super jealous. Nyaturally, I expect you to be cool enough to

live up to such a

name.

# If you picked Hanamonogatari

### Cheetah

Everyone thinks cheetahs are the fastest ever, but that may not be the case. They can go all out for a split second, but they tire quickly. Well, no one does it better than the king of instant speed at least. So make sure mew make the most out of that speed. Be quick and decisive. People mostly deal

with the short term so take advantage of that.



### If you picked Otorimonogatari

### Liger

Half lion and half tiger. They are a human creation so I find that a bit troubling if you ask me. Then again, dogs and cats are products of selective breeding. Well, I'll make sure you have good luck with money so think of it like I'm praying for you. Just don't go thinking that'll be enough meow.

# If you picked Nisemonogatari I

### Rose-gold pussy willow

So you're a plant. Quite a few plants take their names from cats but purrsonally I think the way willows softly sway in the wind makes them most like them. Now, I want you to face the rough waves of society with the same flexibility. Or let them flow past you even. As long as your will doesn't break, you can

get through anything, no matter what.

# If you picked Nekomonogatari Shiro

## Tiger

Watch out for fire! Be careful around it! It's hot! You'll get burned! And beware of a certain katana, too! You'll have no idea when it'll come slicing down from the sky! By the way, white tigers are tigers, but black tigers are a kind of

shrimp. The more mew know.



I know gulls are birds, but they "meow" like cats so it's close enough. How amewsing is it that while wildcats are cats, "sea cats" are actually birds? Why not call them "sky cats" then? Anyway, make sure people don't get your name wrong. There's never a time to let others mess up your name.

On the other paw, don't be getting other people's names wrong yourself.



### If you picked Koimonogatari

## Cougar

When it comes down to cougars, they have a "womanly" vibe, don't you think? Having picked such a sexy cat, you must be in love. Nyot that I'm in any pawsition

to even talk about love. I guess I'll just keep an eye on you.



Before you go thinking what pandas have to do with cats, bears are also part of Carnivora. So that means panda bears are part of the same order. And get this, they are one of the few species that are herbivores. All they snack on are bamboo. This makes me more worried about them going extinct over wildcats. But, like, don't they have the coolest camouflage? It's the purrfect ratio of black and white.

### If you picked Kizumonogatari

## Fishing cat

This may seem obvious from their name, and this is really a minor point, but fishing cats hunt fur fish. The belief that all cats are fish lovers is a little misleading really. The only cats that go out of their way to catch fish are these guys. Watch yourself around water now. In the end, despite their name,

fishing really isn't that big of a deal.



### If you picked Onimonogatari

# Leopard seal

Anyather one for the Carnivora order. Purretty broad, huh? They're called "leopard seals". Who do you think would win in a fight between leopard of the sea and leopard of the land? Nyaturally, the leopard seal would if it was in water and the leopard on the ground. But don't you think "sea leopard" sounds cool? Like a terrifying beast of the sea. Anyway, these horoscopes are just excuses and bearing have no on vour fortune. Your fate is all up to you.



TRANSLATION: RYOUKUGAN

In the final volume of his four-part *Odyssey Series*, *3001: The Final Odyssey*, Arthur C. Clarke defines an "intellectual" as such: "someone who has been educated beyond their intelligence". As someone who has lived her entire life cramming knowledge and information into her body just as someone who is starving seeks to live, when I read this definition for the first time, it felt as if my own name were called out. Without a doubt.

Receiving an education isn't necessarily a good thing, nor is having knowledge. Only "knowing" something is exactly the same as not knowing it.

"No, sometimes knowing too much might be a far greater disadvantage, Hanekawa-san. Hanekawa Tsubasa-san. When you're bound by superficial knowledge, you can't do anything. That doesn't happen to most people", Senjougahara said in response to my lead-in.

"That said, we live in an information-overloaded society. If you try asking one thing you'll be taught ten;<sup>20</sup> you'll be taught things you don't even want to know. These days, the right to teach others is valued even more than the right to learn, and we have a system where no one is allowed to live in ignorance and indifference. No one even cares about me personally, the information just keeps flooding in. I can't stand all the little tips the world feels like it has to give." Senjougahara continued, seemingly overwhelmed.

Once a schemer fell for his own scheme, but I think these days intellectuals fall for knowledge.<sup>21</sup> There's no need to even make schemes, knowledge jumbles together just like them.

"You're right, but even so, you probably can't cut off information entirely, Senjougahara-san. Of course, all we can do is keep a mental kickboard to keep ourselves from drowning in knowledge."

"A kickboard... Grasping at straws when you're drowning is certainly unreliable,<sup>22</sup> but I don't know... For someone like me, it seems like carrying a kickboard full of teeth marks."

Senjougahara said something I don't understand very well—I wonder if it means something like "being impatient" and "grinding your teeth"? Or, it could be that Senjougahara wants to say that the "breaks" should be put on the influx—the torrent of knowledge. She has the strength to shut the world out. It's a dangerous strength, but it is a strength. There's no room for doubt about that.

"Speaking of boards, Hanekawa-san, the monolith that appears in 3001: The Final Odyssey gave intelligence to humanity, didn't it? It gave us intelligence and made us evolve."

<sup>21</sup> Hanekawa is referring to the Japanese expression 策士、策に溺れる (*sakushi, saku ni oboreru*, "a schemer falls for his own schemes").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Hanekawa is playing off of the Japanese expression 一を聞いて十を知る (*ichi wo kiite juu wo shiru*, "ask one (thing) and know ten").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Senjougahara is playing off of the expression 溺れる者はわらをもつかむ (*oboreru mono ha wara wo mo katsumu*, "a drowning man will even grasp at straws").

"Yep. But the monolith itself isn't either good or bad. It seems neither intelligence nor information have any meaning for it, either."

"In the long run, it's a problem, isn't it, Hanekawa-san. Once we know something, it means that that we can't not know it. Living things can't run against evolution. We can't expel the intelligence that we've been infused with from our bodies. We'd burst if we tried."

The wish, "I want to live without knowing", won't be realized.

For better or for worse.

We're forced to grow to that extent.

"Well... There's nothing convenient like if you could eliminate the knowledge and information you thought you didn't need from your memory once and for all. But, I think you're right. Rather than running against or flowing against something, it's proactive degeneration, and rather than being a recession it's a decline."

"..."

"What's wrong, Senjougahara-san? You suddenly clammed up."

"No, nothing's wrong. There's nothing wrong. Nothing at all. But without a doubt, that body of yours might be too stuffed with knowledge", Senjougahara said.

Without even trying to hide her genuine amazement.

"Most people wouldn't even know that 2001: A Space Odyssey has three sequels. Hanekawa-san, you really do know everything, don't you."

Taking Senjougahara's cue, I answered like I always do.

"I don't know everything; I just know what I know."



MAYOI CASTLE

Yomiuri Shimbun 17 August 2013 Onimonogatari BD/DVD vol. 1 23 April 2014

Innocence, innocence, fly away!<sup>23</sup> Run against the winds on the path of fate

TRANSLATION: HAREMLESS

Lucy Maud Montgomery is well known as the author of *Anne of Green Gables*, but this morning let's talk about something "blue" instead of something "red" like Anne's hair.<sup>24</sup> In other words, we'll be talking about the story starring Valancy Stirling, *The Blue Castle*.

"Have you read it before? Araragi-san."

"The Blue Castle? Actually Hachikuji, I'm sorry for being a bad student, but I've never even heard of this book until just now."

Araragi-san replied after thinking for a few moments. *Anne of Green Gables* is just so famous that not many people would recognize *The Blue Castle* here in Japan in any case.

"I'm a bit embarrassed to admit it, but out of Montgomery's works I've only read *Anne of Green Gables*. I think Senjougahara's only

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Play on the popular saying "Pain, pain, fly away" that parents say to little kids, with "pain" (いたいの, *itai no*) replaced with "innocence" (いたいけ, *itaike*).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Anne of Green Gables in Japanese is 赤毛のアン (akage no an, "Red Haired Anne").

read Chronicles of Avonlea even with her habit of reading anything and everything."

"What kind of reader is she?"

I guess there are all sorts of weird indiscriminate readers out there.

I began to explain the plot of The Blue Castle to Araragi-san.

"So the protagonist is a 29-year-old woman named Valancy Stirling with a power of imagination you could say rivals even Anne Shirley."

"Wouldn't it be pretty bad to have an imagination like Anne Shirley at 29...?"

"One day Miss Stirling is told by her doctor that she only has one year left to live, and the story follows how a woman who has been oppressed by her family and relatives for her entire life chooses to live out the remainder of her life."

I ignored Araragi-san's comment. (It would be quite bad though, in reality.) Anyway, this isn't a book review so I'll stop there for the introduction. (I also won't explain why the title of the book is *The Blue Castle.*) I decided to ask Araragi-san a question.

"What would you do if you were told that you only had one year left to live, Araragi-san?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"I suppose you're always one wrong move from dying tomorrow, but what I'm asking is what you would do if you could survive for an entire year."

"That has a completely different gist to it. Hmm"

I wonder—Araragi-san said with his arms crossed. One of the nice things about him is that he'll always at least consider any question I ask him. Being so very impressed by his laudable actions (that was a lie, just in case) I gave him a few suggestions.

"Like travelling around the world, or going on a shopping spree, or confessing to someone who you've always loved, there are lots of things you could say."

"I do definitely get that feeling of not wanting to leave with any regrets but hmm... Actually, I might not do anything."

"You wouldn't do anything?"

I wasn't expecting that answer. I wonder if he was just trying to say something different to get attention. I hate that sort of mentality of always wanting to show off one's appeal with a burning passion, so I immediately cut in.

"Doesn't that just mean you've given up on everything? Does that mean if all you've got left is one year, and no matter what you do it's all pointless, that in a way you've fallen into complete despair? You really are too self-conscious."

"That's not what I mean. Like, when you're alive it's just all things that you need to do. I mean as long as you're alive there's always going to be some activities you can't avoid."

"Activities. Do you mean doing work?"

"Not just work, even 'playing' or 'resting' are just activities you have to do to live. In order to live tomorrow you have to eat a nice meal and sleep well, but if I only had one year left to live I'd be free from all those sorts of responsibilities."

"Hmm"

In the end there's not much of a difference from just falling into despair and giving up, in my opinion. That's what I would say, but he does have a point. And even a journey of a thousand miles has to start from a point.<sup>25</sup> And like he said, being able to do nothing at all might be the greatest luxury to an organism. Chasing your dreams. Looking for hope. Shooting for your targets. Those might seem like nice and positive examples of self-actualization but they all require quite an amount of hard work and effort in exchange.

But in fact because of the little time remaining in your life, you wouldn't have to travel the world, you wouldn't have to go on a shopping

 $<sup>^{25}</sup>$  Hachikuji quotes a slightly different version of the saying "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step" where "a single step" is replaced by "a single mile". She makes a pun with -理 (*ichiri*, "one point") and -里 (*ichiri*, "one mile").

spree, you wouldn't have to confess to that person you've always loved. That line of thought could warrant some consideration.

"As long as we're alive, we must try to bring ourselves the greatest amount of pleasure possible, so wouldn't it be nice to be free from that burden on our lives, at least at the end? Wouldn't it be nice to not have to do all the things that we want? You get tired after a while. You get tired of having to enjoy every moment of your life in this world all the time.

He sure talks like he knows everything there is to know. But it is like him to say that with all the deaths he's experienced.

I felt a little warm on the inside.

"By the way Hachikuji. I know you said that this morning we'd be talking about something 'blue' instead of something 'red', but if we're talking about *Anne of Green Gables* wouldn't that be 'green'?"

Says the person who apologized for being a bad student.

I feel like that warm feeling inside me was all for nothing.

"You know in Japanese sometimes we use the word 'blue' instead of 'green',<sup>26</sup> but in the end it's talking about the same thing. I think you should apologize and correct yourself."

I wanted to punch him.

"Come on... It's not a big deal really, you could say that the future for a company looks 'black' if they're 'in the red'.27 You're always like this, getting all worked up over the little details, 1/f yuragi-san."28

<sup>26</sup> Japanese, like many other languages, traditionally did not distinguish between the colors we know as "green" and "blue" and used a single term (青, ao) to refer to both. There is a word (緑, *midori*) that means specifically "green" but is not generally used in situations where this distinction is not needed. "Go" traffic signals and vegetables are 青 but green paint is 緑.

<sup>27</sup> The original compares two words for a baby: 赤ちゃん (*akachan*) with the word for "red" (赤, *aka*) in it, and 嬰児 (*midorigo*) with the word for "green" (嬰, *midori*).

<sup>28</sup> The *gi* in *yuragi* is written the same as in *Araragi* (阿良々木) as 木 as opposed to the normal ぎ. See also the next note.

"Don't talk about someone like a healing wave<sup>29</sup> or something. Apologize for that and correct it too. My name is Araragi."

I see.

I guess I'll have you live for a bit longer, or quite a while longer, and enjoy life without complaining. So I, Hachikuji Mayoi, prayed that you, Araragi-san, would have a long life, then returned to our usual exchange.

"Sorry, I stuttered."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> 1/f ゆらぎ (*1/f yuragi*) or "1/f noise", also known as "pink noise", is often (unscientifically) thought to have calming effects in Japan and is marketed as such in a variety of household electronics.



TRANSLATION: TRAUBEN SAFT

Senjougahara Hitagi had been deceiving. As for what she'd been deceiving, the answer would be everything—everything and everyone around her, for two years. She had been hiding the curse that had befallen her, the condition she had been suffering from, all that time. I can't help but think about what that must have been like. Of course, I'm not an especially honest person either. I'm an adolescent high schooler who lives his life lying just like anybody else, somehow managing to get along. But I end up wondering precisely because I'm that kind of person, what it must be like to deceive, to continue to trick everything and everyone, to keep on lying no matter what.

"If anything, won't you have to do that from now on, Araragi-kun? After all, you'll have to hide the fact that you're a vampire—not just for two years, but the rest of your life." Senjougahara answered.

Class had already ended and there was no one but us in the classroom.

The classroom was deserted—I'd forgotten how I'd come to ask that question. Anyhow, Senjougahara had, quite unusually, neither dodged the question nor resorted to her usual verbal abuse.

"Well, you're right... That's why I wanted to ask you about this."

"You wanted to ask. Me. About how to lie?"

"Ummm..."

That was essentially what it was when you broke it down but putting it that way would mean calling Senjougahara Hitagi a liar, and that was just too blunt.

"I don't think humans are very honest creatures," I answered, doing my best to mince my words.

"But it's clear that you build up stress by lying in any kind of relationship, right? I don't know how to say it, you feel guilty, you have a nagging conscience... What I want to ask is, how do you put up with those sorts of feelings? Don't people fundamentally *not* want to lie? Isn't that why they phrase things so they just *barely* don't count as lies, or lie as little as possible?"

"If there's anything I can teach you as a master of lies—it's that tricking people and deceiving people are similar, but not identical things. You shouldn't lump those two words together, or say them in the same breath." Senjougahara said.

Even though I had just changed the topic to something anyone could agree with, Senjougahara threw my consideration completely out the window. It seemed like she was in a good mood today. Well, seeing as this was what she was like when she was in a *good* mood, she was pretty hard to deal with as a classmate, but...

"Araragi-kun, do you have some small change?"

"Small change?"

Senjougahara sighed.

"You might even consider a 1000-yen bill small change coming from your family background, but I'm talking about coins."

"My family isn't that rich..."

Well, I knew I had *some* coins in my coin purse at least... I took out my wallet and gave Senjougahara a 100-yen coin.

"Thanks."
"....."
"...."
"...."
"...."

"Hey. I'm not letting you *have* it! Give it back, OK? Didn't you want to use it for something?"

"Let's make a bet, Araragi-kun." said Senjougahara nonchalantly, her fingers playing with my 100-yen coin.

"Heads or tails—front or back. A coin toss. If heads comes up, I get the 100 yen. If tails comes up, I'll become your slave for the rest of my life."

"Why are the stakes so high!?"

I don't want to do that!

I don't want to gamble with someone who'd bet their freedom over their body on a coin toss, let alone only for 100 yen!

"Are you Two-Face or something? Don't stake your life on the side of a coin."

"Two-Face. Quite an admirable villain."

She spoke like she was a villain herself. What kind of heroine is she? "Don't worry about it. I just want to trick you, as an example... You better use this as reference for your pitiful life."

"My pitiful life..."

Why do I have to be spoken to like this? Or was this her strategy, to goad me into taking the bet? Well, no, Senjougahara is always like this, so it's not like she's provoking me here in particular... Maybe because she's in a good mood today, she *really* does think my life is pitiful.

"Trick me, huh?"

That means she's clearly trying to cheat in this gamble of a coin toss, right? But how does she expect to trick me in such a simple bet when the coin isn't even weighted? Since she's pretty good with handling

stationery, I'd expect Senjougahara to be rather dexterous... But I doubt she could manipulate the sides of the coin like a magician.

Hm. I'm a little intrigued.

"OK, I'm in."

"Ha. What a pervert. You exposed your rotten nature."

"No, wait, what I'm interested in is just how you're going to deceive me, OK? I'm not interested in you wanting to become a slave or anything!"

"The maggots in your brain seem interested."30

Senjougahara quickly prepared the coin toss. I checked one more time—drawing up some defenses against her, her having almost announced that she's going to pull some trick, probably is something like good manners in this kind of situation.

"You're not going to switch out the coin I gave you with another one, are you?"

"Hmph. I don't have any 100-yen coins I could exchange it with. Don't underestimate my poverty."

Those were heavy words.

"Let's decide this so that we don't argue about it later. The side with the numbers is the front. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, that's OK."

Strictly speaking, there is supposed to be a properly defined front and back for coins, but I didn't know which was which. I don't really remember which was the front and which was the back of a postcard, either... If I had to recall it, with both coins and postcards, it was the exact opposite of what you'd normally think. Well, the probability is fifty-fifty, so it doesn't really matter.

<sup>30</sup> Both when Araragi speaks about his interest in the gamble and Senjougahara talks about the "maggots in his brain", the verb 湧 〈 (waku) is used, which has the meanings "to rise up, to well up, to appear" among others. So, while Araragi talks about his arising interest in the subject, Senjougahara talks about metaphorical maggots emerging from his "rotten mind".

"Well then, let's start." said Senjougahara before flipping the coin with her thumb—the coin which her life (meaninglessly) depended on, all too easily. I really don't know what kind of nerves she has—at least judging from the way she flipped the coin, there was no apparent scheme or intention behind it.

Senjougahara Hitagi didn't stop the 100 yen with her hands. She let the coin fly straight up then drop on the desk. If there was any way to cheat in a truly innocent coin toss, it would be to manipulate the position of the coin inside your hand after catching it. But at least Senjougahara didn't do that.

The 100-yen coin lost its momentum and dropped flat on the table after spinning on it for a short time.

In other words, it didn't come to the unlikely kind of conclusion that'd be expected in this kind of situation—the coin not falling over, standing on its rim. But in the end, an unexpected side *did* show itself.

The side with the picture of cherry blossoms was up.

In short, it was the back side.

"... Wait, what"

I shook my head, even though I was the winner.

What was up with this sloppy, meaningless unfolding of events?

"What were you trying to do, Senjougahara? Didn't you just lose?"

"What are you talking about? I won, didn't I?"

Senjougahara said that, confidently, unconcerned, without changing her expression.

She didn't at all appear to be intimidated—that wasn't the face of someone who had come to be my slave for the rest of her life. Rather, she acted like a queen.

"Look. Isn't the front side up? We decided before that if heads comes up I win, right?"

"What?"

I looked at it again. Was I mistaken? I thought that, being a well-meaning person, but it was still the same side as before, the side with the cherry blossoms.

"What? What? Do you want to turn this into an argument about whether you did or didn't say it? 'I said that the side with the cherry blossoms was the front', something like that? You don't really mean to say that was your trick, right? I don't accept that. You *did* say that the side with the numbers was the front."

"That's right. I said the side with numbers on it is the front—and that's why I won, Araragi-kun."

Then, Senjougahara... brought her index finger close to the 100 yen on the table, as if beginning some kind of séance.<sup>31</sup> But she didn't touch it. Her finger stopped just above it. While holding her finger there, she said:

"Don't you see them? The numbers, I mean."

Looking again, there really were numbers written there—beneath the cherry blossom motif. "100 Yen", written in small letters.

Of course it was not handwritten. Just like "Japan" was written above the blossoms—it was impressed there.

"On coins, there are numbers on both sides. So if you bet on the side with the numbers in a coin toss, you'll always win." Senjougahara said, then quickly picked up the 100 yen.

I was dumbfounded. Well, that was a blind spot. To be honest, I hadn't really been aware of the fact that there were numbers there. But thinking about it now—the face value was impressed not only on the 100-yen coin, but also on the 1, 10, and 500-yen—in large font on one side, and small font on the other side. Even the 5-yen coin, which only has the face value impressed on one side, has the year it was minted impressed on the other side.

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influence and show the answer to some question.

³¹ In Japanese, the term こっくりさん (kokkuri-san) is used here. It's something close to table-turning where you put a coin on a sheet of paper with numbers and answers like "yes" and "no" written on it. Then everyone puts their index finger on the coin and recites the phrase "Kokkuri-san, Kokkuri-san, please come here". After that, the coin is supposed to "move on its own" by some spiritual

But...

Can she really say she deceived me with this?

"Isn't it obvious? It didn't come to an argument of whether you said one thing or the other, but it's clear as day that you tricked!"

"I'm fine with that. That's what it means to trick, not to deceive."

After talking about how it was convenient that the cherry blossoms had come up on the first try—she really didn't know if she should consider herself lucky or not—Senjougahara said:

"In the end, my trick when it comes to lying skillfully, Araragi-kun... is to not care if the lie gets exposed."

Everyone wants to become a good person.

Everyone wants to be a good person.

Because of that, they patch things up so that the lie doesn't come to light. But if you give up on that...

Humans can lie as much as they want.

"The goal of lying is to make yourself feel good, not to deceive others.

That's why in order to make yourself feel good, no matter what the other person feels, no matter how he may think about you, you just don't care. If you don't decide clearly whether you want to be a good person or you want to feel good, then you end up somewhere in between. What do you think? Was that helpful?" said Senjougahara, flipping the coin one more time.

Not up in the air, but at me.

I caught it.

"Well, it helped me, but..."

I looked at the 100-yen coin in my hand, while thinking "Well, there's no way I could live like that"—that is, while saying that it didn't help me at all, I asked her. Wondering about how she had learned how to lie this way by 18 and whether she'd been taught by anybody.

"Are you fine with giving me this back?"

"Yes. In front of you, Araragi-kun, I think I feel better when I'm a good person. With you, Araragi-kun" she said toneless, without any emotion whatsoever, like always,

"I want to build a relationship without front or back side." No.

She *may* have put emotion into that.



TRANSLATION: TARABLE TRANSLATIONS

Let's talk about Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll & Hyde*. Why yes, I *did* read it just to make myself look good, sorry. Whenever a middle school student like me (I'm Sengoku Nadeko, by the way, hello) reads a book, especially foreign literature, they're almost always doing it just to show off (100% fact). To tell you the truth, this book is one of the ones I added to my shelf to make myself look smarter back when Koyomioniichan came over to play. Some time after that, I picked it off the bookshelf while I was cleaning up my room. I'm not used to reading, so the very manageable page count was probably the biggest reason I chose this one. But, in any case, reading is an encounter. I thought it was a very interesting book. It's a very famous work, so I already knew some of the details, but it turned out to be a masterpiece that differed from my expectations in a good way.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> The word used here is written 失恋(*shitsuren*, "unrequited love"), but has an indicated pronunciation that reads しつこい (*shitsukoi*, "persistent").

Alrighty then. It's human nature to want to brag a little after you read a classic. So after finishing it, the first thing I do is call up my friend, Tsukihi-chan.

"Jekyll & Hyde? Oh, are you talking about *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*? Yeah, I read that, too! That really takes me back... I read it back when I was in elementary school, so I'm a little hazy on the details, but the premise was pretty interesting. Hmm, so you just finished reading it, Nadeko-chan?"

... She's already read it.

When you read something beyond your level, but it turns out the person you're bragging to about it has already read it, the blow to your pride is nothing to shake a stick at. Tsukihi-chan's perfect pronunciation of the English title was nothing to shake a stick at, either.

It feels like the wind has been taken out of my sails, but the fighter in me won't let me quit here. If she's already read it, then that's that. There are still things we can discuss about it. So I ask her opinion.

"What did you think about it, Tsukihi-chan? Err, I mean... You know, about Dr. Henry Jekyll and Mr. Edward Hyde's relationship. I guess they were kinda symmetrical, like mirrored reflections of each other..."

I choose my words carefully. It would be embarrassing to say something off the mark, after all. Saying something stupid would give Tsukihi-chan a reason to get all excited. I'm a total beginner when it comes to reading, so there's a very good chance that I misread or misinterpreted something.

"Mr. Hyde, who's 'only' wicked, might seem like a totally different personality... The complete opposite of Dr. Jekyll, who's 'only' upright, but they didn't hate each other at all. If anything, they really needed each other..."

I sound like I'm reciting a crummy book report, more of a summary than an analysis, but Tsukihi-chan seems to understand what I'm getting at.

"That's true. While you couldn't really call them friends, they certainly made something of an odd couple. Just like how the north and south poles of a magnet attract each other, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were drawn to one another. It's comparatively easy to see why Mr. Hyde needed Dr. Jekyll, but looking at it from an outside perspective, it might be harder to understand why Dr. Jekyll needed Mr. Hyde," she says, agreeing with me.

Tsukihi-chan seems to be in a good mood today. I hit the jackpot (days where I go broke are more common).

"Dr. Jekyll's friends couldn't understand why he tried to defend Mr. Hyde, either. And when he left the lawyer, Gabriel John Utterson, a will that entrusted everything he had to Mr. Hyde, it went past strange and straight into suspicious. It was a complete mystery why he would want to do that."

Even though she said that she was hazy on the details, she's able to touch pretty deeply on the content of the story. That's Tsukihi-chan for you. It's enough to leave *me* the one feeling overwhelmed, since I've only just finished reading it. But I have to fight on. I have to keep trying until it's obvious how hard I'm trying.

"If you think about it that way, Dr. Jekyll might have relied on Mr. Hyde more than the other way around... I guess it's hard to follow the logic that pure good could seek out evil, though."

But even if it doesn't make sense logically, I can understand it on an emotional level. At the very least, in the context of the story, I think it's very convincing that Dr. Jekyll would be fascinated by his bad friend.

Good hates evil, and evil hates good... That's a very one-sided way of looking at it. There's room for the perspective that good can envy evil, and evil can envy good, too.

"Well, when it comes down to it, people tend to seek out the things they don't have within other people. See, for example, you may look up to me, but it's not like *I* don't have anything at all to learn from *you*, either."

Tsukihi-chan went and decided that I look up to her... Well, she isn't wrong. As someone who tends towards self-hatred, I really respect the way Tsukihi-chan loves herself so much.

"I'd never want to be like that myself, but your earnest, one-track mind can seem almost stunning to me."

"So you'd never want to be like me..."

The first part is so depressing that it's hard to hear the compliment.

"But," Tsukihi-chan speaks, suddenly changing the mood. "To answer your question of what I thought of their relationship, I'd have to say that I don't think it was a very healthy one. Being together with their polar opposite made them both go bad. It hardly seemed like a very constructive relationship. It was a destructive bond, in which neither of them could become happy..."

A destructive bond, in which neither of them could become happy. A destructive bond that the people around them couldn't understand.

Still, looking at the world around us, I don't think that sort of relationship is so uncommon. You could end the argument by saying that relationships between people can't be clearly explained, and that only the people in question can really understand them, but Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde had some reason that they didn't want to put an end to things between them. From her blunt criticism of the two, Tsukihi-chan probably had a similar impression after reading it... I think.

"What about you, Nadeko-chan? If a girl who was your complete opposite suddenly showed up, do you think you could grow to like her?"

"Huh...? What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. If you met your polar opposite—if you met Anti-Nadeko-chan, do you think you'd get along with her? Do you think you could see eye-to-eye?"

"Hmmm..."

I'm a little taken with the clever nickname of "Anti-Nadeko,"<sup>33</sup> but it's hard for me to picture a girl with a personality the exact opposite of mine. A cheerful, lively, sociable girl who reads lots of books, looks

<sup>33</sup> 逆撫子 (sakanadeko, "Anti-Nadeko") is made from the combination of 逆 (gyaku, "reverse") and 撫子 (nadeko). 逆 is read as saka when next to 撫, and so the nickname is pronounced similarly to 逆撫で(sakanade, "to rub someone the wrong way").

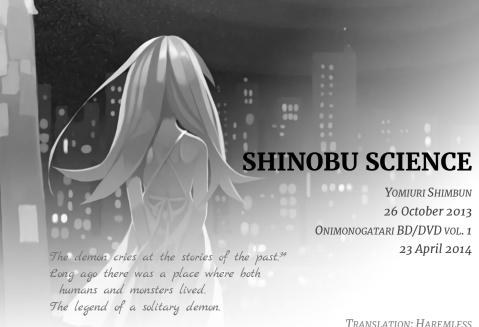
people straight in the eye, and works hard... Maybe? Thinking about it that way, she sounds totally flawless, and I'm sure I couldn't help but like her... Still, no matter how I might feel about her, I bet someone like that would hate me. She'd hate me, or maybe I'd just make her mad...

"We might not get along... and we might not see eye-to-eye, but I'd still like to meet her."

"Even if she hates you? Even if she gets mad at you?"
"Yeah."

I want to meet her, and I want to see what she's like. It feels like, through meeting her, I'd be able to encounter a brand new "Sengoku Nadeko." It's sort of like the reason you'd look in a mirror—but I'm sure she'd reflect my image even more vividly than a mirror, so I'd have to be careful not to turn to stone upon seeing her.

"If she gets mad at me," I say, while thinking to myself that Anti-Nadeko-chan would probably hate this about me, too, "then she'll get mad, and that'll be that."



In the opening of Isaac Asimov's I, Robot, are his famous Three Laws of Robotics. The book itself is a collection of short stories, but all of them involve the relationship between humans and robots who are ensnared by the Laws. The story that I, Oshino Shinobu, was most excited about was the sixth story, Little Lost Robot. The sorrow of a robot enslaved to those inferior to it, and the determination to stand up to the humans by taking advantage of the small loopholes in the rules that govern its life was quite thrilling, even to me as a vampire having lived five hundred years.

"Hmm... Now that you mention it, I remember that you were a big science fiction fan, Shinobu-oneechan. I guess a monster that just lives for a long time would be quite fascinated with future civilizations."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> It says 往年の話をすれば鬼が泣く (ounen no hanashi o sureba oni ga naku), which is a play on the expression 来年のことを言えば鬼が笑う (rainen no koto o ieba oni ga warau, "the devil laughs at talk of the future") meaning you can't rely on the future.

The Doll Girl, shikigami of that violent exorcist, Ononoki Yotsugi, nodded without a hint of expression or emotion.

"Unfortunately, the only science fiction I've read is Diaspora."

"Don't lie."

Are you trying to brag?

Seeing as this little girl is both a doll and a shikigami, she is essentially a robot, but possibly due to the violent exorcist's principles, she doesn't seem to have the Three Laws installed.

"The Three Laws? You mean cyan, magenta and yellow?"35

"Those are the three primary colors. Also I don't remember ever allowing you to call me by that ridiculous name 'Shinobu-oneechan'."

"But you still get mad at me when I call you Shinobu-oneechan."

"Are you asking me not to?"

"Well, the only science fiction I've read is Diaspora."

It seems she's still quite proud of that.

Her stubbornness is quite the sight however.

"I find myself quite interested in the theme of humans being used as tools for the convenience of civilization. Don't you think humans, not in science fiction or robots, actual humans, fundamentally have a tendency towards self-destruction along with the advancement of civilization? Don't you think that instead of advancing, they're degenerating? Instead of getting more refined, they're simply being weeded out? I always think 'All of the products of scientific advancement we have are supposed to make our lives easier, but we can never really rein them in.'"

"Well, when you lump all humans together, it seems like the people who 'create' those tools of convenience for society and those who 'use' them are often different people."

In fact, with all of the diverse "products of scientific advancement" there are, you can't just lump them up all together. That said, I do

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Yotsugi mistakes The Three Laws (三原則, *sangensoku*) for The Three Primary colors (三原色, *sangenshoku*).

understand what the Doll Girl was trying to say to some extent. I did find the world "self-destruction" a bit too strong.

"You thought the word was a bit too strong? Sorry about that. I wasn't trying to take a dig at you, Shinobu-oneechan, what with your familiar rebelling against you and leaving you a pitiful shadow of your former self."

"What an earsore."

I don't want to hear that from some shikigami no one can even control. But I wonder, if a tool used by our civilization, like a car, or a cellphone, or a game console, or a weapon, anything really, were conscious, would it want to be used by humans?"

Assuming that being controlled by a lesser being would be a disgrace to it and assuming that accepting this control itself would be a fundamentally painful experience, would being controlled by a perfect being, one that would allow it to use its functions to its fullest capability, one that could open up its vast bank of knowledge, would it still be reluctant to be controlled by such a being?

"That's a meaningless pretense assumption. In the real world, if we were to give machines consciousness we'd be talking about fantasy, not science fiction, Shinobu-oneechan."

"Stop being such an earsore again."

That's another thing I don't want a tsukumogami like you telling me. Actually, should you really be saying that?

"In the first place," the Doll Girl continued expressionlessly and emotionlessly, paying no heed to my critical glare. Is that all there is to this girl?

"That 'perfect being' would be part of fantasy anyway. There's no way it could really exist. People's desire for it to exist has actually left human society worse off to a greater or lesser extent."

"Hmm..."

Says the person who's never even read the books.

"Why bother using a big and fancy-sounding phrase like 'to a greater or lesser extent', couldn't you just say 'more or less' " was what I was about to say, but I was interested enough to generously remain silent.

"That sounds rather interesting. Continue."

"There's not much for me to 'continue' on to. I was just saying what I thought of off the top of my head. But if you really want me to, I would say that that 'perfect being' would probably be the controlled rather than the controller, or the used rather than the user. Of course, if you look at it from the controller's point of view, there'd be no point in controlling a useless being."

"Ka ka, a useless master with a capable slave. I suppose the both of us know quite well that it's not always the strong that control the weak."

"Right. 'Survival of the fittest' is easy to understand, but the relationship between the strong and weak isn't always that simple. You could say that situations like 'David and Goliath' aren't uncommon in our society."

The trick to clawing your way to the top of society is to know how to throw those above you down below you. That's the way it is and that's how it's always been—the Doll Girl said with an all-knowing tone.

Are you some vassal planning to overthrow their lord?

And "clawing your way to the top" was quite a strong choice of words again.

The "Humanity Association" that appears in *I*, *Robot* was acting in anticipation of a robot rebellion I remember, but I suppose I shouldn't bring that up with the Doll Girl never having read it before. She's not just being controlled by the violent exorcist, and she doesn't seem to be conscious of the fact that she's stuck below the humans... Actually, does she even have a consciousness in the first place?

Although, I find it quite interesting that even without a consciousness, she seems to be able to think of things. I get the feeling this has quite a few implications.

"Hmm, I feel like I'm starting to lose track of this conversation that I was on top of at the beginning."

"I suppose you know what it's like now to have been at the top in the beginning only to fall to the very bottom."

"Who said I'm at the very bottom now."

"Now that I think about it, being a controller doesn't seem like a stroll in the park anymore, it seems more troublesome than I thought to rule over those greater than oneself. I almost want to throw it all away and just fall to the bottom. That's what you did isn't it?

""

"Let's go back to our original topic, maybe losing grasp of the reins on something you created by yourself in the beginning is just part of nature. Humans developed their civilization in order to do the things that they couldn't do themselves. It was just too much for them all along."

"Even so, we can't just go back to living in caves. All we can do is fall into ruin along with civilization."

"I hope that civilization is all that's left."

She said without a hint of a smile on her face, some sort of joke that no one would find funny. She probably would have added "I said with a posed look" a while ago. Although, she was right, in the real world without the Three Laws, not like the future Asimov envisioned in *I*, *Robot*, humanity and science may not be able to coexist forever.

I started imagining.

I imagined a world where humans had all disappeared, where everyone had long disappeared, a world fallen into an annihilation brought on by itself. A world that would fall into ruin even without me. And indeed, it seemed like a place that would be dominated by the complex and bizarre tools of civilization rather than wicked spirits and monsters. And so I would simply stare in horror at such a world and say

"... Not bad."36

<sup>36</sup> One of Shinobu's catchphrases, ぱないの (panaino), is a contraction of 半端じゃないの (hanpa ja nai no, literally "it's not half-bad"). According to Araragi's suspicions, at some point she lost sight of the original meaning and started using it as a greeting.



ART: SHAFT
TRANSLATION: MAXDEFOLSCH

Hai hai, hello to all readers of this Shonen Magazine supplement. Oshino Ougi here. "Arslan Senki" is interesting, isn't it! I enjoyed reading both the first and the second episode very much. I really like feeling excited when I read manga. It was so much fun, I thought about reading the original work on occasion. The feeling that reading is chained like this is really fun. I could keep reading books forever. It's a perpetual reading mechanism. Anyway, what kind of developments is awaiting in the third episode published this month? I want to get out of the classroom soon and return to reading.

So, this is the "challenge to the readers". Please stop reading the novel here, and deduce the truth of the case that Araragi-senpai encountered in first year. As I declared in the work, everything needed to identify the true culprit has been given. To say it in the style of old game books: "Please, solve the mystery to free us of this locked room!". Well, even if I say

it this way, most people don't know about old game books. Actually, I don't know either. I don't know anything.

By the way, the one who invented this "challenge to the readers" is a great mystery writer called Ellery Queen. If you put this sentence before the solution, the reader is forced to narrow down the answer to one, and after reading, he goes "Ah, I knew the criminal from the beginning". Mystery writers seem to be able to masterfully avoid those who boast about finding a certain part of the novel suspicious. Well, when I read a mystery novel I basically find everyone suspicious, so when someone isn't, it's definitely the criminal. In the end it's just guessing, isn't it. When I heard that story, I thought that the experts who leave their name in history were too smart.

Experts aside, as far as realistic things are concerned, it's impossible to eliminate the possibility of a coincidence, or an outsider. Also, since this case happened in a world with oddities, I can't rule out that it's "the act of a ghost" that transcends the laws of physics, but well, saying it in mathematical terms, that's probability theory. Let's go with what is possible, or has the highest probability—when you can't remove all the options that are logically impossible, the truth is the one that's logically most likely. Please identify who created the incomprehensible situation faced by class 1—3, whether it's someone who attended the study group organized by Oikura—senpai, or someone who didn't attend the study group with a different approach.

For the sake of clarity, I inserted a list of characters on the next page, with a simplified profile attached. This is common in foreign mystery novels—it's not in order of appearance but in alphabetical order, but well, please consider that the culprit is someone in this list. You could say it's a multiple—choice question. Although I don't know if a question with so many options can be considered a multiple—choice question, if you can guess, you can feel something unnatural even from this table alone.

I must claim here that I, Oshino Ougi, am not the culprit (of course, it's alright not to suspect Kanbaru-senpai as well).

Please keep in mind the possibility of the narrator Araragisenpai or the poor Oikura-senpai being the perpetrator. If Araragi-senpai was the culprit, I would throw my own character away and burst into laughter. That's hilarious wait, is this Episode-san's character?

One hint.

As I pointed out, Araragi-senpai hides some information when retelling the story of his past. However, he is not lying. In front of me, even if you have secrets, you can't lie—basically. This time, it's within the basics.

By the way, this story is one of the arcs included in "Owarimonogatari", scheduled to be released in October, but this "challenge to the readers" will not be included in that case. This is Ougi-chan service limited to this Shonen Magazine supplement. The character table will also be cut, so everyone, you were lucky!

The time limit is, let's see, only five minutes—is what I'd like to say, but I feel sorry for taking five minutes of everyone's precious time, so let's say two minutes. It's two minutes from 5:58 where the clock's hands stopped, until the school bell rings. If you can't answer within two minutes, please pick someone from the suspect list on the next page, depending on your intuition (needless to say, you don't have to think about any accomplice). Of course, you can follow your intuition and get the right answer. Even mathematics, like other subjects, is an academic field that can't be established without intuition. But please don't just decide by majority vote. For the sake of this foolish Araragi—senpai.

Well then, I wish you scrutiny and good luck.

Oshino Ougi

P.S.

Hint 2.

Common multiple.

| Name                   | Study<br>group | Club       | Notes                                                         |
|------------------------|----------------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Keiri Ashine           | Yes            |            | "Handsome Man".                                               |
| Koyomi Araragi         | No             |            | Class president.<br>The only full mark.                       |
| Biwa Arikure           | No             |            | Ill-tempered.                                                 |
| Michisada Igami        | Yes            |            | 68 points.                                                    |
| Kyuusu Ukitobi         | No             |            | Worst score among the girls.                                  |
| Sodachi Oikura         | Yes            |            | Chairwoman.<br>Study group<br>organizer.                      |
| Enji Kikigoe           | Yes            |            | Mischievous.                                                  |
| Hoka Kijikiri          | Yes            |            | Absent-minded.                                                |
| Aizu Kube              | Yes            |            | Library committee (nickname).                                 |
| Nageki Gekizaka        | Yes            |            | Secretary in charge.                                          |
| Sousho Koudou          | Yes            | Volleyball | Enthusiastic about club activities.                           |
| Okitada Kouma          | No             |            | Goes to cram school.<br>97 points without the<br>study group. |
| Ayazute<br>Shinaniwa   | No             | Track      | Elitist.                                                      |
| Tsuuma Shuui           | Yes            |            | Vice-president.                                               |
| Juudo Shuzawa          | Yes            |            | Always wants to teach you.                                    |
| Kokuchi Shuuchi        | Yes            |            | Reserved.                                                     |
| Ruise Sunahama         | No             |            | Day duty the next day.                                        |
| Hitagi<br>Senjougahara | No             |            | Weak constitution.<br>98 points without the<br>study group.   |
| Kiichigo Daino         | Yes            |            | Eloquent.                                                     |

| Name                 | Study<br>group | Club        | Notes                                               |
|----------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Komichi Tetsujou     | No             | Softball    | Mediator.                                           |
| Jiku Toune           | No             |             | "Icing".                                            |
| Suisen Toishima      | No             |             | Laughs easily.                                      |
| Chouka Nagagutsu     | Yes            |             | Frivolous.                                          |
| Roka Haga            | Yes            | Track       | Gamer.                                              |
| Seiko Hayamachi      | No             |             | 92 points without the study group.                  |
| Sekirou Higuma       | Yes            |             | Former student council president.                   |
| Jouro Hishigata      | Yes            | Softball    | Quarrelsome.                                        |
| Shimono Fukadou      | No             |             | Acts cute.                                          |
| Tenko Fukuishi       | No             |             | Shy.                                                |
| Shijima Fudou        | Yes            | Swimming    | Liar?                                               |
| Sakaatsu<br>Funuyami | No             | Volleyball  | Short.                                              |
| Kabe Madomura        | Yes            | Light music | Bed hair.                                           |
| Hyoui Marizumi       | No             |             | Distrustful.                                        |
| Meibi Mizaki         | No             | Art         | Artist spirit.                                      |
| Miawa Mebe           | No             |             | Kansai accent. 95 points without the study group.   |
| Shokunori Yuba       | No             | Baseball    | Aggressive attitude.<br>Submitted a blank<br>sheet. |
| Shoukei Yoki         | Yes            |             | Old-fashioned.                                      |
| Shitsue Waritori     | No             |             | Practices kendo.                                    |

The name of the culprit is...



I feel that this is a situation which for those who have come here through the anime is quite obvious, while those who have come here only through the figure will feel that nothing makes sense. It was soon after my weird coexistence with the violent specialist, Kagenui Yozuru's shikigami, Ononoki Yotsugi had begun; Senjougahara Hitagi came to visit the Araragi residence.

As to why she came, more than saying that it was to see how my preparations for my university entrance exams were going, it would be more accurate to say that she came to ask "Araragi-kun, you are not slacking off on your studies, are you?"

But, actually, she did not ask me that question. Because she was struck speechless on seeing the plush doll that was in my room.

For someone like Senjougahara who is quite used to using sharp words, a situation where she couldn't put two words together has to be quite something. Still, she is not someone who would become speechless at something on the level of seeing a plush doll in the room of a male high school student.

The reason Senjougahara became speechless was that the plush was actually Ononoki Yotsugi.

"Of course, irrespective of what a plush's true form is, if I had come across a life-sized doll of a girl in my boyfriend's room, I would be speechless too..."

I want to believe that when she looked back for a second, she was not thinking that she should go back.

"What is this? What is this about? As your girlfriend, I want an explanation."

"Ahhhh well, so many things happened... And even if I try to explain it, it will be too difficult and inconvenient..."

More than an inconvenience, it will be a spoiler.

Though I did swear that I wouldn't keep secrets about the supernatural from Senjougahara, it's not like I wanted to keep it a secret. It was just that it would be very difficult to explain it.

In the end, how do I logically explain the fact that a former opponent of mine with whom I fought to the death is now in my house as a plush doll?

"...... Well, it doesn't matter as long as it doesn't hinder Araragikun's exam preparations. Still... Hasn't your house become like a haunted house?"

"A haunted house...?"

That's quite a harsh way of saying it.

Still, when I'm myself something of an oddity, it is quite possible that the place I live in is like a haunted house, I suppose. As Ononoki was behaving perfectly like a doll in front of people, there was no reaction even when she was poked, had her hair stroked or kissed on the cheek by Senjougahara.

Actually, she really is a doll—

"You! What are you doing? It's my plush. Isn't it weird for you to be kissing it on the cheek?"

"It is making me curious. Also you may have forgotten, Araragi-kun, but I love cute girls."

"Isn't that Kanbaru's setting...?"

Now the situation of the Valhalla Combination where supposedly Kanbaru included Senjougahara by herself has become quite suspicious.

"Can I take this home with me?"

"No. Obviously you cannot take it home with you."

"Why not?"

"Why is that in katakana now?"

"I can't take it, no matter what?"

"Like I said, what is the use of saying it in katakana?"37

Ononoki-chan did not even react to our conversation.

The way she was pretending to be an inanimate thing was so good, that even I, who was watching her move and talk till the moment Senjougahara rang the intercom, almost believed that she was a real doll—yeah, of course Ononoki-chan is a real doll and is really not alive.

Still, when I think about the fact that she is actually made from a human dead body, I cannot believe how horrifying a thing is there in my room.

And Senjougahara, who is now stroking such a doll, is also like a witch.

"Hmm, so I can't take her home no matter what, right? I did expect Araragi-kun's 'no', though"

I thought "Don't think of it as 'Araragi-kun's 'no'; instead think of it as being for Araragi-kun's sake."

"So, how do you have to think of me for the topic to become whether you can take Ononoki-chan home?"

"Well, if you are being stared at by such a cute plush, while you are studying for your entrance exams, won't it be distracting? Wouldn't it become difficult to concentrate?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> The "not" and "no matter what" are in katakana, which is used for emphasis.

"Difficult to ...?

What are you? My wife?

Still, it was a sharp observation.

Strictly speaking, Ononoki-chan belongs to my younger sister, Tsukihi. So it's not like she'll always be in my room. Still, it's not a very good feeling to study with someone watching you and without being distracted by the cuteness.

"Fufu, it is alright, Araragi-kun. I thought something like this might happen. So there is something that I brought for such a situation."

"If you say that you expected something like this to happen, it's not in-line with how you were speechless in the beginning, is it?"

"My brilliant idea to divide Araragi-kun's light and dark parts... Do you want to hear it?"

"I don't want to hear it, but..."

It cannot be avoided.

"In order to cancel out the effect of a cute figure, all you have to do is use a cuter figure. JAAANNNNN!!!"

With that sound effect, Senjougahara pulled "that" out of her bag.

"A product of Good Smile Company, 'Nendoroid Senjougahara Hitagi'. If you have this on your desk, no matter what distractions are around you, you will not get any thoughts of slacking off."

Look at her, doing such things as if she were a really honest type of girl...!

Brilliant idea or not, it just feels like the number of eyes looking at me has just doubled. In the end, I was the one who became speechless.

"The Hitagi Figure to watch over your home from morning till night. Note: the hair will not grow."

"Though it can be changed with another style."

"In order to keep you company during your exam time, how about two per household?"

"Stop trying to make them buy one more."



TRANSLATION: HAREMLESS

Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 is a book about a world in which publication regulations, oppression of the freedom of speech and censorship are strengthened whenever those issues cause discord in society; a book about book burning, but you could also read it from a completely different point of view and see that it's an outstanding piece of entertainment written with a playful mood, and yet it still makes a sly bastard like me enjoy it. Surprisingly, it may be more interesting to read this book without any preconceived notions. To start with, the protagonist, Guy Montag, is one of the people who burn the books. He's a book burner who dresses like a firefighter, douses books with kerosene and burns them to ashes. Almost sounds like a rock star, doesn't he. Well, eventually, he meets a 17-year-old girl named Clarisse and slowly begins to change. You could even take it as a very well written "boy meets girl" story, although Montag isn't exactly a boy at his age.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Literally "poison fang" (毒牙, *dokuga*), meaning sinister ways, vs. "poison tongue" (毒舌, *dokuzetsu*), meaning harsh.

"I've read Fahrenheit 451 before, if that's what you wanted to talk about," Senjougahara said in a cold voice; she has an attitude like she doesn't even want to chat with me. Though in the case of an indiscriminate reader like Senjougahara, she may not like that I talked about a masterpiece in that way. Sort of like how a mystery fan would hate for Sherlock Holmes to be talked about like it's a character-driven story and not a piece of detective fiction. But how I read a book is my choice. All the different ways of reading a book are equal, and there are no better or worse ways. If you set out to limit that, it's probably no different than suppressing the freedom of speech.

I knew Senjougahara would feel uncomfortable if I brought that up, so I pointed it out right away, and once I did she seemed even more displeased than before... Naturally.

"Don't play games with me, that wasn't what I was thinking at all. My memory is just a bit fuzzy since I've read it four times, and my impression of it was different each time. Since the first time was when I was in second grade, I read 'Fahrenheit' as 'Farrah N. Heit' and thought, 'who's that?"

"How can you expect me not to make fun of you after hearing that? If I can't make fun of you, who am I going to make fun of?"

As soon as the words left my mouth, I thought "crap". I should have just ignored her little anecdote and continued the conversation. The moment I accidentally replied like that, I was caught up in her clever rhetoric—I was careless. My arbitrarily criticizing her slip-up has changed this from a simple exchange into a rally. This melodramatic girl has a sense for turning the person she's talking to into her audience by making a fool of herself. It's an unsuitable style of deception for me, personally.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> In the original text, Senjougahara misreads 華氏 (*kashi*, "Fahrenheit") as はな氏 (*hana-shi*, "Mr. Hana").

"The second time was around the end of elementary school. I thought 'Isn't 451 degrees the temperature paper burns at? Wouldn't a person burn before it even got that hot?" "

"You were a twisted little brat, weren't you."

"I can't help it, I was inhospitable for a while."

"Inhospitable?"

"My tongue slipped. I meant that I was in the hospital for a while."40

Senjougahara continued, ignoring my silence, "The third time... was when I was in middle school; I read it for my summer homework. I wrote quite the exemplary book report on it. I even singed the edges of the paper a bit for some added effect. The teacher got quite mad at me though."

"That's what I'd call a good teacher. What about the fourth time?"

"The fourth time was when I was in the first year of high-" Senjougahara began and, as if suddenly remembering something unpleasant, she bit down on her lower lip, forcibly stopping herself from speaking. She bit it so hard she might even have bit her tongue. I wonder, what could it be that she would go so far to stop herself from saying?

Well, it may not have anything to do with her impressions or the contents of the book. She probably just doesn't want to tell me about the time that she read it, that is to say, she doesn't want to talk about when she was a first-year in high school. It's almost certainly because back then was when I met this girl, although that could hardly be called "boy meets girl".

"... Anyway, I read it four times, but I never got the impression that it was the kind of story you were saying it is. I guess you could say that the fact that the interpretation of a novel depends on the reader is what makes them one of the best ways to tell a story."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> In the original text, Senjougahara says she was in the sodium oxide (酸化ナ トリウム, sanka natoriumu) instead of the sanatorium (サナトリウム, sanatoriumu).

"I'm just shocked that there's someone out there who'd read the same book four times."

"I wonder how book burning is going to happen once digital books have become more widespread. I don't think most electronics would burn at 451 degrees."

"It'd still be hot enough to destroy them."

More importantly, if you want to erase digital data there are more efficient ways of doing it than burning the device it's on.

"I see," said Senjougahara. "No matter what it was like in the 1950s when *Fahrenheit 451* was published, with all the other different types of media there are these days, it may not even be worth it to cover books in kerosene and burn them now."

"Are you saying that humanity's two greatest inventions, fire and paper, are already out of date? I wonder about that, I don't really feel like that's the case."

They say that people aren't interested in literature anymore.

Apparently, the number of people who read books is dwindling.

Apparently, you barely even find people reading books on the train anymore. Is that really the case? From my personal experience, you'd rarely ever get on a train and not see at least one person reading a book.

"Well, even if it's not exactly 'boy meets girl', our book burner, Montag, does eventually start having different thoughts and ideas once he meets Clarisse. What do you think about that?"

"Hmm?"

Considering she seems to want to end this conversation with me quickly, Senjougahara brought up a question likely to expand the topic—even though it would be fine if I lied, I decided to answer honestly.

"I was very moved, of course. He's a book burner who has a change of heart when he learns the beauty of books and is influenced by them; I couldn't help but think of myself."

"..."

Senjougahara fell silent for a while, then sighed disappointedly and said "Actually..."

"I, of all people, almost foolishly thought, 'even a person like you sometimes has a change of heart someday, right?' "

"Didn't you do that, have a change of heart?"

"Yes, but that was..."

"Not a change of heart, but falling in love," she murmured, and for the first time today, she smiled.

I wanted to say that there must have been something more behind her words, but just this once, they didn't seem to be part of some carefully-planned statement, so I decided to just ignore it.

I didn't really feel like touching upon the topic.

I'd probably get burned if I brought it up; she's fairly hot-blooded. The lesson I should take away from this is, even though there's that old saying that "you can count yourself among the friends of the wise men of old by reading books", you can only call yourself someone's lover by living in the present with them.



As someone who has known Senjougahara Hitagi for many years and who continues to believe in her, saying something like this feels like a special kind of betrayal; but, when I first met her during the first year of middle school, the impression I had of her was not a good one.

Or rather, sorry for saying it as it is.

I thought, what is this person?

If I can say it a bit more informally, I thought that "a very dangerous person has come"—just bear with me a little, this is all from very long ago, and back then I had just graduated elementary school and I was just a 12-year-old whose interior and exterior appearance, intelligence and character were all very suitable to be called a brat.

But if you say that Senjougahara-senpai had no responsibility in what happened, I would like to assert that it was not so—I want to emphasize that.

To begin with, when the ace of the track and field club marched, like a raid, into the gymnasium where the basketball club was training, every member of the basketball club seemed to flinch. Along with her followers (not only second- and third-year students, but also some first-year students were mixed in), they were looking like a daimyo<sup>41</sup> procession. That's why it stands to reason that Senjougahara had some responsibility.

It is as though when I was about to slam dunk, Michi appeared.<sup>42</sup>

Though she was smiling kindly and had a gentle demeanor, it was actually more frightening that way—and the vigor of the followers was as usual.

"You are Kanbaru-san? I heard the rumor that you are very fast on your feet—if I'm not being a hindrance, would you please allow me to observe and study you?"

What is she, a lady?

Though I wanted to retort back like that, in those days Senjougaharasenpai was really someone like a rich, young lady—she had a behavior that was as though she had just stepped out of a novel for young ladies.

I shivered on realizing that such a person actually existed.

I want to make it clear that at this time, the "shivering" was not a very good feeling—when I think back on it now, it felt like her way of speech and conduct was driving me away.

I understood that what she required from me was something different.

And that this person was different.

And so this was in fact my first impression of her—of course, Senjougahara-senpai was a famous person, and so, I had been hearing about her since the entrance ceremony and even before joining the basketball club.

Along with Hanekawa Tsubasa, the two of them were the star players—if you wanted to continue in this middle school, I was told (by

.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> A daimyo (大名) is an old Japanese title for powerful feudal lords.

 $<sup>^{42}</sup>$  *Michi* ( $\mathbb{S}$   $\mathcal{PF}$ —) is the nickname of Michiko Shouda, the wife of Akihito, the Emperor of Japan. Her popularity was so high that it led to a movement called the michi-boom, where every Japanese young girl wanted to look like her.

my teachers during the entrance ceremony) that you cannot afford to go against these two (I was wondering what sorts of people those two were; but it looks like the things I was told were not wrong).

But, as you can see, for various reasons, I was a 12-year-old with an extraordinary obsession with the speed of my legs and speed of running—and for "various reasons" I couldn't become a member of the track and field club. When I went to the ground in April, it wasn't for a trial period in a club, but I had become interested in the ace of track and field club, Senjougahara Hitagi-senpai, and wanted to see her run.

Can a person run so beautifully like this?

It took my breath away.

I haven't received any special guidance in my running—and even now I haven't received any professional training in sprinting; so my running style is mostly self-taught.

But one can say that self-learning is also a style in itself; and so I don't have any complex on that point. Still, compared to my reckless style of running, Senjougahara-senpai's running style was completely opposite and very beautiful.

It was the perfect form of a person running.

Truly, I became interested.

Still, I felt that I couldn't imitate that style—this person is not the same as me, and I'm also different from her.

I thought that the track and field club's uniform was a bit erotic, but this time it became irrelevant.

Though I never had any plans to join the track and field club—I think that on seeing that perfect running style, I gave up completely.

I was set free.

It could also be said that the reason I existed as a basketball player afterwards is because of Senjougahara-senpai's running style—of course nowadays I'm so enthusiastic about basketball that I had almost forgotten about that impulse that brought me here; but I will talk about "we don't really know what will become the crossroads in our lives" at some other time.

If I have to say, as far as my life goes, whether it was that surprisingly I was in the public gaze, or that the contact had been initiated by Senjougahara-senpai who actively tries to avoid getting involved with others; just that fact was enough to leave me dumbstruck. But training while being observed by the aristocratic Senjougahara-senpai (and party) was not easy.

"Is it OK? Kanbaru-san?"

In that way, I was called out by Senjougahara-senpai—just hearing those words "is it OK" made me feel absolutely not OK, but even leaving that, it still shocked me.

When I looked closer, I could see that she was a senior with features that made me feel like she was one step higher than me,

"Like the rumors said, you are really fast, aren't you—how about it? Won't you join the track and field club now? And spend your youth with me and grow?"

..... An excellent and magnificent scouting.

By the way, at that place, though the captain of the basketball club (a third-year student) was there, she was behaving as though Senjougahara-senpai's (a second-year student) recruitment activity was of no concern to her and didn't say anything.

What are you doing checking the balls now?

No matter how many times you look, it's not like any holes are going to appear, is it?

Though there was my disappointment towards my captain, setting that aside, there was also a little happiness—no matter what the circumstances, and no matter the tone of the words, "my speed" which was something that I was proud of was being praised and recognized, and this made me feel pleasantly surprised.

Such simplicity hasn't changed even now.

It is a foolish trait of mine.

Still, I was not an idiot who would yield to such a scouting without thinking. I was an idiot who thinks.

While taking care not to destroy senpai's reputation, taking care to be very prudent, I politely refused her.

"Please come back again sometime."

Uh?

What is this memory?

Who is this cheeky brat? It is me.

I wonder if it was the age to go against authority or whether it was because I was afraid that if I did not refuse her so stubbornly I would be swayed by her—anyway, the phrasing may have been a little different (I want to believe it was), in this manner, I turned down Senjougaharasenpai's invitation completely.

"Oh my. It is very good that you are so energetic. I'm becoming more and more charmed."

Although Senjougahara-senpai large-heartedly accepted what I said (when I think back on it now, wondering "who was that" was not the complete thing), the eyes of the followers who were standing behind Senjougahara-senpai were giving me piercing looks.

This is bad, I'm dead.

As you would expect I thought so, but stopping the followers who were starting forward with both her hands and without even looking back at them, Senjougahara-senpai said, "It is alright. Taming such cute girls is incredibly enjoyable to me."

Who are you talking about?

The images in my head are too strong and the Senjougahara-senpai that I remember might be a little different from the actual second-year middle school student, Senjougahara-senpai; but generally, there is no mistake in my memories of the first contact with her which was like a stress-interview.

Saying, "Well, take care" Senjougahara-senpai left.

Leaving the way of speaking, she did not even concern herself with my rude response; surely she must have been hurt a little; still, I thought it was OK this way. At least, this way is better than making her wait for my reply—of course as I have so bluntly turned down the invitation from the school's most popular person, I will probably encounter obstacles in my middle school life; still, even if I tried to falsely agree with her, I possibly couldn't pull it off well.

If you are coming, come; I will take you up—or something like that. When I thought that, it really came.

But when I went back to the gymnasium on Sunday, it was not the followers-army, who wanted to punish me for not knowing my place and being rude, who was there; it was Senjougahara Hitagi. And that too, this time she was alone.

"Everyone, the weather is good today, isn't it? It is OK if I observe you today too?"

The seniors of the basketball club became flustered—it felt like it was a different sort of commotion from yesterday; when I asked them later, it seemed it was a very rare thing to happen.

Instead of saying that she likes attention, it is more correct to say that she had a personality that draws people to her wherever she is—like the fact that Senjougahara-senpai came here alone means that she purposefully sent everyone away before coming to the gymnasium.

Why?

There must be some reason for accepting my reckless remark of "come back again" and really coming back again and that to choosing a place away from her "home ground"...

Smiling and accepting the chair prepared by the members of the basketball club, Senjougahara-senpai watched over our, or more precisely my practice; but I couldn't guess anything about what she was thinking.

After all, I had joined the basketball club on the strength of my legs and I was used to having spectators; still, when watched so bluntly it is somewhat difficult. On that day there were too many missed shots and many misses in the dribbles—the only thing I managed to exhibit without mistakes was my legs.

But I suppose that was what she wanted to see, so Senjougahara-senpai must have been satisfied.

"Hey, Kanbaru-san, have you changed your mind about what I asked you yesterday?"

"No, not at all..."

Without even thinking, I answered.

Of course, it is difficult to be rude to someone who has come to see me for two days in a row.

"Hmm. Why don't we do this? Let us have a 100-meter race. If I win, you are to transfer to the track and field club. Isn't this a wonderful idea?"

"Eh?"

She tilted her head.

Don't be saying "eh".

It's not like you don't understand what she means, right?

"I will not be doing that."

I turned her down clearly.

"But doing that will stop me from coming to the gymnasium daily without a break."

"You are planning to come every day..."

I said no.

I took care not to be rude like yesterday, but still I conveyed it to her.

"Oh."

Senjougahara-senpai covered her mouth as if she was surprised.

"That is strange, was it my miscalculation?"

"What is?"

"I expected that people like you, once challenged, cannot stop till they see it through to the end."

"...."

That expectation—was correct.

But, leaving that be, I cannot compete in a race with anyone.

Of course, if I rise to her provocation here, accept the challenge and win, it may all come to an end here; but the damage that would be caused if I lose cannot even be imagined.

No, it is not sure that Senjougahara-senpai will back down if I win—so it is disadvantageous to take such a risk.

"OK"

She said that she understood.

Leaving me dumbstruck, Senjougahara-senpai left first—before going she put away the snacks she was eating and the chair that she was sitting on, thus not betraying the way she was brought up.

If she has really understood I'm also good with that, but what exactly Senjougahara-senpai has understood is a complete mystery.

And that mystery was solved the next day.

Senjougahara Hitagi who came to the gymnasium for the third time was not wearing her uniform like she was till yesterday—it was not the erotic and stylish uniform of the track and field club either; so if you ask what she was wearing, she was wearing the uniform of our basketball club.

The number on the back was 4.

The number was written on the front too, so it is not correct to call it "back number" (athlete's number?), anyway, it was our captain's number.

When I looked back, for some reason our captain was in her gym clothes—in her gym clothes, she was polishing the balls as if none of this concerned her.

That is the ball that I just polished.

How shiny do you want to make it?

If you polish it any longer, it will become smooth.

It seems, on being requested by her junior, she has lent the uniform, which could be called as the symbol of our team.

You can say that all the authority that she had held has in this moment disappeared completely.

Once this matter is resolved, it will be a coup d'état.

"If you say you won't compete with me on the track, let's compete in your field, basketball? Is that OK?"

"Ha, haa..."

At this point it was more of hesitation, and when someone calls me to participate in a competition, as a first-year student, I really do not have much of a choice.

Just for the sake of it, getting permission from the captain (the sad reality is the "just for the sake of it" being attached to "captain"), taking half of the court, it was decided that Senjougahara-senpai and I would have our basketball showdown.

Showdown.

Dueling.

Still, if you ask whether it was a dramatic battle like the ones the words "showdown" and "duel" call to mind, it was not so—of course it was not too quick, and there was a lot of tension; but when the main event is a free throw contest the tension does go down a little.

We received the warning that physical contact would not be allowed from the "just for the sake of it" captain, er, "captain"—I was only the newest member of the club, and though Senjougahara-senpai was not specialized in basketball, there is a small chance of something happening—for those reasons, I did not object to that restriction.

The one who got 10 points first wins.

A contest with no handicaps—as it was a simple contest of deciding the order and then shooting one after the other, it was not going to be an intense contest; starting it properly, shooting in order and it will be over in thirty minutes.

10 to 9.

In such a close contest, it was Senjougahara-senpai's victory.

While both of us did miss targets, and the score went back and forth, the first one to reach the 10 points was Senjougahara-senpai.

"It was a good match.", said Senjougahara-senpai, while elegantly flipping her long hair. "Kanbaru-san, it seems that basketball suits you more than track and field—from now on too, continue in this same way."

She continued—and with that she turned on her feet and left the gymnasium.

I was thinking, now that I have lost I have no choice but to join the track and field club; I should shift to something other than running (like high jump or long jump); even while deciding make-shift solutions like that I had prepared myself. So when Senjougahara-senpai withdrew so suddenly, it left me stunned for an instant.

But, it was just for an instant.

I immediately chased after Senjougahara-senpai—I ran after her at my maximum speed and soon caught up to her as she walked away elegantly and grabbed her wrist.

The way I grabbed her wrist was maybe too violent or wild, and though Senjougahara-senpai looked back at me puzzled it was very like me.

Has she gone back to her usual self? It was a straight strong gaze.

While accepting that gaze, I...

I asked, "Is this what you had in mind from the start?"

I—my tone becoming like I was cross-questioning her is also very like "me".

"Was it all a game to compete with me and win and then let me off the hook?"

"... What are you talking about? Why do I have to be doing something like that?"

Senjougahara-senpai answered so without trying to avoid anything. To her, I...

"In order to protect me."

I said.

It was a simple plot—it was not a mistake to think that Senjougahara approached me, who was making a name for myself in the basketball club, for scouting.

Senjougahara-senpai must surely have been previously prepared for the scout not being a certain success.

And if that happens, though Senjougahara-senpai would mediate it somehow; well, it would not have been a case of bad news spreading like wildfire, but rumor that that the a first-year student who had just entered the school had gone against the famous Senjougahara Hitagi would surely spread—and if that happens, my school-life would certainly become dark.

If that happens, when that happens, it was my way of thinking, but—it was my foolish idea.

But Senjougahara-senpai prevented such a situation, before it happened.

Though she might have been able to control her followers who could be considered her close associates, she would not be able to make everyone understand—though people are good, each and every one is also full of ill-will.

That's why, it was necessary for Senjougahara-senpai herself to take the initiative and settle things with me—with her winning, the matter ended.

No, just winning would not have been enough, it had to be a close contest with the new member on whom the basketball team had high hopes and to stand in front of me after.

On top of that, it was a free-throw contest.

... If I think back, the captain, who usually listened to what Senjougahara-senpai, deciding the rules of the match at that time strongly was strange... For example, an exhibition-like match of shooting in order, keeping score, a free-throw contest that can be controlled, all of this could have been informally conveyed while borrowing the uniform (I've changed my views).

If I had accepted the challenge on the second day—of course, for Senjougahara-senpai this was the best plan—at that time by adjusting her running speed, she would have created a close contest.

Someone who can say "I will make it a close contest and win" whether it be a race or a free-throw contest must be someone with great self-confidence—of course as long as you win, nothing can be said against it.

By challenging me clearly and by clearly recognizing me in front of everyone, it was like me being awarded the license to go on continuing in the basketball club by Senjougahara-senpai. And so, her fans who wish me ill will not appear.

"... Just for example, even if I was thinking about something like that."

Senjougahara-senpai said in a serious voice—very suddenly the mood was different from just before, it was a flat voice.

"If you said that to me, don't you think everything would be ruined? Don't you think you would reverse my consideration for you, now?"

One shouldn't recognize the casual considerations shown, Senjougahara-senpai was admonishing me saying that—and I let go of her wrist gently.

And then I took her hand again before the wrist.

This time, gently.

Following the example of Senjougahara-senpai's behavior, softly, gently—Senjougahara-senpai probably must have been expecting a handshake to become friends again, but doing something completely surprising, I kissed the back of her hand.

"Ha..... Haaa!?"

Senjougahara-senpai said in a surprised voice, it was almost a scream. Facing her I declared,

"I don't think so."

"Because, I have decided that I am going to accept your consideration towards me more than it is necessary, Senjougahara-senpai."

From now on, I am your dog.

I said so.

Senjougahara Hitagi and Kanbaru Suruga.

For the two people who would later on be referred to as "The Valhalla Combination", this was the starting point—

"Are you an idiot?"

Even now, I think that, the acceptance that came like that with a scornful laugh from Senjougahara Hitagi probably came from her impartiality.



## **SURUGA PALACE**

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An uncanny relationship formed by a quirk of fate<sup>43</sup> Pray for a good match.

TRANSLATION: HAREMLESS

Read *The Red House Mystery* by A. A. Milne, Kanbaru Suruga. When it comes to Milne, he is, without it needing to be said, most famous for being the children's author who wrote *Winnie the Pooh*, but apparently the only full-length mystery he ever wrote was this book, *The Red House Mystery*. So that's why I read it. What? The guy who wrote *Winnie the Pooh* wrote a mystery novel? I want to read it! I want to read it!—that was pretty much my train of thought. There are probably people who would say that I'm not a real appreciator of literature if they saw me like that, but I don't particularly like having my eating habits, let alone my reading habits criticized by other people.

"I'm sure they're right though, I'm pretty indiscriminate in my choice of books. Kanbaru, what mood you configure your bookshelves to

 $<sup>^{43}</sup>$  This expression is usually written 合縁奇縁 (aien kien). Here, the kanjis 縁 have been replaced with 猿 ("monkey") which is usually pronounced さる (saru) but in this case has an indicated alternate reading of えん (en) to make the expression work.

is what one may call your prerogative, but a selection from such an eccentric direction is not something I can very well approve of. *The Red House Mystery*?"

"No, I haven't read it yet."—said Senjougahara-senpai as she appeared to trace back her memories. She is a person who can look like a god no matter what pose she takes—I'm jealous.

"But, well, I think I just might have heard the plot somewhere. Ah, oh no! If I recall any more, I might remember the main plot twist."

It seems that somewhere along the way she had heard the plot of the story up to a crucial point. I suppose that's just the fate of old classics. Let's say it's hard to avoid spoilers in this day and age.

"On the other hand, I have no idea about the plot of *Winnie the Pooh*. Let me see... Was it something like Pooh is actually a doll?"

"That was the premise from the beginning, Senjougahara-senpai." "Oh, is that so."

Her range of expressions had become much wider recently and now there were some faces she would only show me, but she would still act all displeased when someone pointed out her mistakes. That was one thing that hadn't changed about Senjougahara-senpai since middle school.

"I wonder which one came first?"

"Hmm?"

"I wonder whether Milne wrote The Red House Mystery or Winnie the Pooh first."

"I think Winnie the Pooh came after."

"Hmm. Somehow I always had the impression that *The Red House Mystery* came first... I don't mean he didn't make it big writing mystery novels so he switched over to children's books or something."

"Hmm. I don't know much about Milne, but apparently he was the type of author who didn't like writing the things that people wanted."

I suppose that wording would be my usual not quite correct spin on it, but even without considering my natural tendency to be somewhat impolite, the foreword of *The Red House Mystery* certainly gave off that impression.

"In the beginning he made a name for himself as a humor playwright, but when people started wanting him to write those sorts of works, he started writing murder mystery novels, and when those started becoming popular, in other words when people started wanting him to write them, for some reason he started writing *Winnie the Pooh*."

"You could say he was the type of author who didn't want to be stuck with a specific label, but I can sympathize with the feeling as a human of not wanting to do something because someone else wants you to."

A bit of Senjougahara's character from before her rebirth was coming back, and you could just take that as a cute sort of humanness, hearing a high school girl saying that. But there would be quite a few troubled people if a popular author were to say that (their editor, or in Milne's case his agent).

"But out of all the people in the writing industry, there has to be a certain number of them who can't work under someone else's requests. You could say they're artists exactly because of that."

It's quite a difficult position. If you let a genius run wild it wouldn't produce a very entertaining piece of work, so in the end some amount of restrictions is needed, but in my personal opinion as an individual not gifted with artistic genius, trying to impose control as opposed to restrictions upon the inborn nature of an artist wouldn't allow them to create anything you could call "entertainment" either. You'd just end up with something completely ridiculous. Milne wrote this in his foreword: "I could take pride in even a trite and bland phone book if I wrote it with passion, but I would find it against my conscience to write even a refined blank verse tragedy if I did so under someone else's command." I'm the type of person who enjoys obeying the commands of those I respect, so to be honest I don't understand this sort of artistic sense very well. I would say fulfilling people's expectations is the greatest joy, but if I were Milne, the famous *Winnie the Pooh* would never have been written... But considering the possibility that more masterpieces of mystery fiction

might have followed *The Red House Mystery*, I would say that no matter how it turned out it would simply be a matter of taste.

"But in the end, don't you think there's a nice balance to it? The fight between the publishers and readers who want the authors to write works that they enjoy and the rebellious authors. Did you know, the thing that troubles authors the most is when people ask them to write however they like."

"I can understand that... Sort of."

Even outside of basketball, it isn't quite as interesting without that bit of strategy when people tell you to just do whatever you want. That said, if an author just continued to write whatever the readers wanted, there's no guarantee that the readers would always respond how the author wanted. Being told to just do whatever you want can be quite troubling, but that certainly doesn't mean that doing whatever someone else wants will be easy.

"In the end the happiest outcome would be for the authors to write whatever they want and the readers to read whatever they want but... Wait. I wonder if this would just be approving of your wild style of choosing books."

That would be quite troubling—Senjougahara-senpai said.

"Now that you mention it," she said with a clap of her hands.

"I had a conversation like this with Araragi-kun a while ago. Something about how we read books. Oh that silly Araragi-kun,<sup>44</sup> do you know what he said?"

I was a bit annoyed at the sight of my senior I respected so much speaking like some character out of a movie, but since I had gotten interested, I listened just like that.

"'In this day and age, I would say just reading paper books itself is already pretty good, and I'm sure any author would be happy to see that too.' Well that's true."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Senjougahara refers to Araragi in a very endearing but old-fashioned and almost melodramatic way here.

Indeed. Indeed, and realizing that being praised by Araragi-senpai wasn't something that happened all the time, I was so happy I lost control of myself for a moment with all my emotions pouring in at once, and I said

"... That's Araragi-senpai for you."

























TRANSLATION: HAREMLESS

"Momo by Michael Ende."

"Don't push yourself Ononoki-chan!"

"Shouted some devilish-looking boy whose name I don't even know with all his might."

"What do you mean you don't know my name. I'm Araragi Koyomi. You totally know me. And don't say stuff like 'said so and so', I thought you wanted to leave that past behind you."

"Come on, we've already got a lot of these short stories so I have to try to change up the style a bit. Change is important, you know."

"You're an oddity and you're saying that?"

"Shinobu and Mayoi already broke the rule that oddities can't be the narrator, so at least I want to follow it."

"Why get serious about the rules only there? You should show right here, now, the rule that there are more exceptions to the rules. Also don't call Shinobu and Hachikuji just 'Shinobu' and 'Mayoi'."

"Ah, who cares about all that. On that note, let me hear about it until the conclusion, that famous piece of children's literature."

"I told you not to push yourself, you're not up for it seriously, it's too much for me to talk to you about *Momo*. Remember, wasn't *Momo* one of those? One of the two most famous books that a lot of kids read when they're little, but they get traumatized from it because they can't understand what it's about."

"That's not a very nice way to put it. By the way, what was the other one?"

"The Little Prince."

"I see. I get the feeling that's more of your own experiences than an actual statistic, Devilish Big Brother."

"It's not just *Momo* and *The Little Prince*, a lot of kids have people tell them to read famous books that are too sensitive or mature for them when they're little, and they feel frustrated because they think they 'have bad taste' and stop reading books while they're still young."

"I guess that just means that books each have a right age to read them at."

"Yeah. People like Hanekawa are the exception I guess, but honestly I'm not confident that I'm even at the right age to read *Momo* or *The Little Prince* yet."

"Unlike me."

"It's just like you. Ononoki-chan, whether you can even read is something I find doubtful."

"And that doubt would be spot-on."

"You can't read?"

"That's how my character is supposed to be now."

"Your character changes too much! At least get that straight. You've got way too much freedom as a character."

"It's fine, I got oneechan to read it to me so I know what it's about. Sometimes you get a better understanding of a story from listening to it instead of reading it."

"What are you getting Kagenui-san to do for you? That person, isn't she your master? ... But maybe if one gets to her level, they'd understand *Momo*."

"Devilish Big Brother, don't try to be so modest, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be too hard for you to read now. Couldn't you actually have fun reading it?"

"Well you can say that because you've already read it... But it's not like I've never read it, I read it and I gave up... I'm a bit hesitant about trying it a second time."

"Just remember that the main character Momo is a little girl whose age is off limits and I'm sure you'll enjoy it, Devilish Big Brother."

"Listen now, never tell me that 'I'm sure you'll enjoy it if you just think of her as a little girl' again. Even if I don't get the book, I'm not so low that I would look at a great piece of literature like that."

"That doesn't sound like something someone who got all worked up by Marilla reading *Anne of Green Gables* would say."

"How did you know that!"

"Still, I guess you have a point, Devilish Big Brother. It might not be the case for *Momo* but children in children's literature are all really children from an adult's point of view, the same way how the adults that children talk about are all adults from a child's point of view. Maybe the reason children have trouble reading *Momo* or *The Little Prince* is because they know that they aren't Momo or the Little Prince."

"That might be the case... yeah. But what was *Momo* about again? I at least remember something about a mystery that comes up. What else was there, time thieves or something?"

"The Men in Grey from the Timesavings Bank. I would say that having read it, as a dead body who time is meaningless for, I can empathize more with the Men in Grey than the people getting their time stolen."

"Don't say 'having read it', Kagenui-san was the person who read it."

"In it, there was a line like this: 'If people knew what death was, they would stop being afraid of it.' If you really think about what time is, ultimately it's just slowly going towards death. That's why everyone values time so much. But if you ask me, as someone who's already dead, it all seems so stupid. Devilish Big Devil, 45 what about you?"

"Don't call me a devil twice, how much of a devil do you think I am? Either 'Devilish Big Brother'46 or 'Big Devil',47 pick one. Actually, don't call me either of those."

"You want me to just call you 'Big Brother'? You pervert..."

"I never said that. So you're saying that all the future holds is death? That seems a bit too pessimistic for me, though I am following you so far. I know *Momo* was by no means a very cheerful book, but it wasn't that dark, was it?"

"That's right, but it's not about treasuring your time either. I was actually expecting the book to be about that when I heard the phrase 'Time Thief', but it turned out to almost encourage you to waste your time. When you think of it like that, instead of a children's book, I figured it was more like a book written by an adult for adults who had their time stolen from them. So, it makes sense why adults would recommend it to children. They're telling them to read this book and not make the same mistakes."

"I don't really agree with recommending a book for that kind of a reason... Don't you think that reading is more about empathizing with the characters than learning some lesson?"

"I wonder. You sound sort of like Kaiki-oniichan when you start talking about lessons. That's just what I think. When you read or see or hear a story and you feel moved by it, when you feel excited by it, that means that it's a story that you wouldn't normally experience, a story

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Yotsugi usually calls him 鬼のお兄ちゃん (*oni no oniichan*) where the first *oni* means "devil" and the second means "big brother". Here, she uses 鬼の鬼ちゃん (*oni no oni-chan*), where the second *oni* is another "devil".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Her normal way of addressing him, 鬼のお兄ちゃん (*oni no oniichan*).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Shortened form, 鬼ちゃん (oni-chan) with only one oni meaning "devil".

that you wouldn't find near you. The more you're moved by a story, the more you realize that it's not something that could exist in the real world. When you think of it that way, reading books is something to think about, huh. They are a waste of time."

"Don't mess with me. Don't read *Momo* and take that kind of feeling away from it."

"But that waste of time is exactly what makes it seem beautiful."

"Don't think that just by saying 'but' you managed to change your image at all."

"By the way, I don't have a cool line or a cool pose anymore, so how should I finish up this story?"

"You never had a cool pose in the first place."

"Ononoki Yotsugi here, a stoic who never smiles no matter what good things happen."

"And I'm Araragi Koyomi... Wait, don't end it like we're commentators or something!"



TRANSLATION: TARABLE TRANSLATIONS

I'm sure you've read Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, haven't you? Although today's society, filled with all sorts of fun and recreation to be found outside of books, has slowly but surely drifted away from literature, there are still certain classics that everyone should read. I think that *Around the World in Eighty Days* is inarguably one of those classics. Don't you agree, Hanekawa-senpai?

"I do... But I find it hard to believe that you honestly think that, Ougichan," Hanekawa-senpai answers, looking irritated by my friendly inquiry.

Hanekawa-senpai is friendly towards everyone and always has a smile on her face, yet somehow she never seems to show me that angelic smile of hers. It's quite disheartening. \*Sob\*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> A play on the phrase 一寸先は闇 (*issun saki wa yami*, "even a inch ahead is darkness"), which means that no one knows what the future holds. Here, 闇 (*yami*, "darkness") is replaced with 私 (*watashi*, "me"). The overall meaning is that because the future is uncertain, you should just say "no" or do nothing.

"What do you mean, '\*sob\*'...? You're the one who's always smiling."

"Oh, that's true."

I wouldn't call it angelic, though.

Still, I'm often told that I have a lovely smile.

"I know that you have plans to travel the world after graduating... So how about it? At what age did you finish reading *Around the World in Eighty Days*? I'm certain that Hanekawa-senpai, the person Araragi-senpai admires so much, has already read such a prestigious work. If you tell me that you haven't read it, I'll be thoroughly dejected. Even more dejected than the time I bought a book based on its title, only to find that the title was actually the editor's idea."

Of course, that's often the case with books.

At any rate, the truth is that there's an infinite number of classics out there, enough that a person couldn't hope to read all of them within their own lifetime. If Hanekawa-senpai hadn't read Jules Verne's novel yet, it wouldn't be particularly surprising.

"I've read it. I think I finished it when I was in second grade."

But, well. You know how this person is.

As a hedge between keeps antipathy green, out of courtesy, I offered, "You know everything, Hanekawa-senpai." But as expected, she didn't respond with her usual catchphrase. It would seem she truly isn't fond of me. Well, I suppose my goal here isn't to endear myself to Hanekawa-senpai, so—with a heavy heart—I must simply press on with the conversation.

"What were your impressions? Either at the time, or looking back on it now."

"My impressions...? It was an enjoyable read, I suppose," Hanekawasenpai answers, looking wary.

Oh dear, you don't have to be so guarded. Right now, I'm just trying to have a light-hearted book discussion. It's not like I'm planning to lure you into some sort of trap.

"Hmm, how to put it? I remember the fact that he went through Japan on his trip around the world made me really happy. Now I'm steering the conversation away from *Around the World in Eighty Days* specifically, but whenever Japan is mentioned in an old foreign classic, it's a bit of a shock. I know it should be obvious, but it really drives home that Japan was actually around hundreds and thousands of years ago."

"Oh?"

That's a rather peculiar view. It doesn't appear to be as simple as feeling happy to stumble across a familiar name in a foreign land... As an avid consumer of all sorts of stories, I'd like to delve a little further into this.

"Do you mean to say that it's objective proof of Japan's existence, like an endorsement from a guarantor? And thus, upon catching a glimpse of the foreign perspective of Japan through printed media, you felt a sense of relief..."

"No, no, I was only in second grade, so of course I didn't have such complex thoughts about it... It's closer to the feeling of reading a story you thought was fiction, only to suddenly find out that it's actually non-fiction, or that it was based on real events or people. ... Though, I suppose someone whose whole existence feels like it belongs in fiction wouldn't really understand that."

"Oh my, that was harsh... Well, I'm a rather shallow reader, so I simply enjoyed the heart-pounding romanticism of a handsome British man traveling the world, while elegantly evading all the perils that face him."

"... Can you even comprehend the concept of romanticism?"

"Come now, Hanekawa-senpai. To say that my true identity is romanticism itself would be an absolute exaggeration."

"So it would be an exaggeration..."

"But considering how you're planning to go location scouting soon, I suppose that traveling the world is no longer in the realm of romanticism, but a simple reality for you. Before long, I'm sure fictional

stories won't be enough to satisfy you... You could say that it's *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* in practice."<sup>49</sup>

"Hmm... I'm not sure about that."

"? What is it? You appear to have objections. Do you mean to disregard the opinion of someone whose uncle is a traveler—or rather, a wanderer—as not worth listening to?"

"Do you really have to put it like that...?" Hanekawa-senpai mutters, shrugging her shoulders in frustration. "Your uncle travels all over the country as part of his work... But I hardly think that means he threw away his books. In fact, doesn't he travel around to collect stories?"

I see, that's sensible logic. It's not like Oshino Meme is wandering from place to place in order to write up a novel... But it's also true that novels aren't the only form a story can take.

"The protagonist of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Fogg, started out on his journey because of a bet he made with his friends. So, when you think about it, just the idea that 'a person can travel around the world' can become the basis for a full novel. In that sense, traveling could be considered a way of looking for stories, as well as a way of creating them."

"Hmm. That's something I understand quite well, as someone who's lived a long life as a transfer student. It's true that no matter how many times you transfer from school to school, you never quite get used to it—just like a story that always has a continuation."

"I wonder about that," Hanekawa-senpai responds, completely distrustful of my words.

Hehehe, I suppose we really can't get along with each other. Don't worry, I'll happily see you off on your trip. Unlike the detective Fix, I

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> A Japanese experimental drama film from 1971, that follows a young man's disillusionment with the world around him and his determination to achieve something in life while his family members are content with their poor social and economic standing.

don't intend to stand in the way of your journey—your story.<sup>50</sup> In fact, I'd prefer that you start out on it as soon as possible.

"By the way, if we consider that it was possible to travel the world in eighty days back in 1873, when *Around the World in Eighty Days* was first published, how many days do you think it would take now? If you take an airplane, I believe it's possible to do it in a mere matter of days... But I suppose that would be a bit lacking in drama."

"Who knows? But no matter how many days it takes, no matter how short a trip it is, I'll always bring a couple of books with me. The books you read on a trip are the most exciting," Hanekawa-senpai says.

"Don't throw away your books, and go on a journey"—is that your intention?

Always learning, but never losing your sense of fun, hm? I really hate that about you.

With a smile on my face, I say:

"You're such a fool."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Detective Fix is a character from *Around the World in Eighty Days* who continually chases after Phileas Fogg from country to country because he believes him to be the perpetrator of a bank robbery.



TRANSLATION: RYOUKUGAN

"Have you heard of Mary Hastings Bradley's Alice in Jungleland, my beloved daughter, Kanbaru Suruga-chan?"

"I doubt you have", my awful mother, Kanbaru Tooe-san, continued with a malicious, smirking laugh. Of course, although I unfortunately didn't know anything about that book, not being very well read, what I wanted to know is why she, who should have passed away long ago in a traffic accident, now seemed to have come back to mock me like this.

Well, I suppose this is a dream.

That we can't choose the dreams we have might be the greatest flaw of the creatures known as humans—is that something like how a child can't choose the parents that they're born to?

<sup>51</sup> A saying meaning that the hard, bitter truth is the best medicine.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> 二輪挿し (*nirinzashi*) means penetration of one hole with two objects which relates to Kanbaru's affinity for BL.

"..... I wonder, is *Alice in Jungleland* a variation on Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*? I was sure that that book had a sequel called *Through the Looking Glass.....*"53

"No, no, that's why I said that the author of *Alice in Jungleland* was Mary Hastings Bradley—she was an American author and an explorer at the same time. It's a record of when she went on an adventure with her family into the interior of Africa."

"I see. So it's a true story?"

"Yes, but although I say it's a true story, since it was written nearly a century ago, naturally you'll feel a bit of the period coming through in its depictions. The title is *Alice in Jungleland* because Bradley's 6-year-old daughter who came with them was named Alice, and the book is written from her point of view."

"Oh....."

I couldn't give a clear answer because I've never read anything by Mary Hastings Bradley, much less her daughter, so I really don't have much interest in either of them. Still, my mother is quite the eccentric. She should have just brought up Lewis Carroll.

"Hahaha. No, no, when I was a girl, Lewis Carroll was my favorite thing to read. I read *The Hunting of the Snark*<sup>54</sup> so many times!"

"Why The Hunting of the Snark? I'd expect Alice in Wonderland to be first."

53 The Japanese titles literally translate to *Alice of the Jungle Country*, *Alice of the Strange Country*, and *Alice of the Mirror Country* respectively, which explains

the Strange Country, and Alice of the Mirror Country respectively, which explains a bit more of Kanbaru's confusion.
 The Hunting of the Spark is a nonsense poem published by Lewis Carroll in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> The Hunting of the Snark is a nonsense poem published by Lewis Carroll in 1876, five years after Through the Looking Glass.

"I read *Alice in Wonderland* quite a few times, too. Although, the one I read was *Alice Monogatari*, which was translated in collaboration by Akutagawa Ryuunosuke<sup>55</sup> and Kikuchi Kan."<sup>56</sup>

"Please read Alice in Wonderland normally..."

At least read The Nursery "Alice".57

I read *The Red House Mystery* just because it was the only mystery written by the author of *Winnie the Pooh*, and while substance is important, even I'm drawn to the events surrounding this book. I don't plan on insisting that I'm a serious reader myself, but to hear the story like this leads me to believe that, without a doubt, it's because of my mother's influence that I read it—after all, don't they say that children grow up watching their parents' backs?

"Humph. Children watch their parents' backs... In other words, parents turn their backs on their children—if that's the case, Suruga, in order to get your interest, I'll disclose some valuable information. I was surprised to find this out later myself, but the Alice whose point of view this story is told from, the 6-year-old girl who's shown riding on the back of a baby elephant at the beginning of the book, went on to become James Tiptree Jr,58 the giant of the sci-fi novel world who wrote *The Only Neat Thing to Do.*"

"J—junior!?"

No.

I shouldn't be focusing on the "junior".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Akutagawa Ryuunosuke (1892-1927) was a famous short story author, best known in the West for his 1915 short story, 羅生門 (*Rashoumon*).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Kikuchi Kan (1888-1948) was the pen name of Kikuchi Hiroshi (written using the same kanji, 菊池 寬), a well-known author and playwright who focused his stories on the hardships and daily lives of common people.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> The Nursery "Alice" is a shortened and revised version of Alice in Wonderland written by Lewis Carroll in 1890 for children under the age of five.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> James Tiptree Jr (1915-1987) is the pen name of science fiction author Alice Bradley Sheldon (née Hastings Bradley), daughter of Mary Hastings Bradley. To avoid confusion, I'm using female pronouns to refer to her while talking about Tiptree even though James is a male name, since Sheldon herself was a woman.

James Tiptree Jr. Naturally, even I know her—she's an author whose books I've read. Instead, I want to know if there's anyone who hasn't read her books. *The Only Neat Thing to Do* was a book Senjougaharasenpai and I were quite fond of in middle school.

"Ha, in any case, people like you probably read it because it was a temporary title for the series finale of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*."

"You're right but, if you say that, doesn't it mean that you only read *Alice in Jungleland* because James Tiptree Jr appears in it as a child? Why say 'I was surprised to find out later'? Please stop lying."

"Incidentally, I've read the version of *The Only Neat Thing to Do* that was illustrated by Kawahara Yumiko.<sup>59</sup> Aren't you jealous?"

Even though you're innocently bragging.....

That might just be a difference of the times, though.

"So that means that both mother and daughter were authors, huh? In fact, wasn't it kept a secret for a long time that James Tiptree Jr was a woman?"

"Yes. Well, sometimes choosing the same career as your mother leads to conflict. How much do you know, Suruga, about Tiptree's heroic life as an author?"

"To an extent, but I couldn't give details."

The fact that she was having adventures in Africa at the age of 6 already seems too amazing to call it just an anecdote, but even without knowing that, the story of James Tiptree Jr's life is breathtaking. My mother said her "life as an author", but I think it would be more accurate to say her life in general. She was the kind of author an eccentric reader like myself, interested not only in an author's books, but also the little anecdotes regarding their life, couldn't talk about without going on and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Kawahara Yumiko (1960-?) is a shoujo manga artist best known for her *Dolls* (観用少女, *Kan You Shoujo*) series.

on. Specifically, as far as her death goes, it'd be best to quietly keep my mouth shut.60

"But, it feels odd. No, if you say it's natural then it's natural, but... Well... Even the great authors in science fiction history, and, well, literary history, were children once, and they had parents, too."

Everyone was a child once.

And everyone is someone's child.

Never mind being "natural", it's life's major premise—but, if it's unexpected, you're liable to lose sight of it, like something totally ordinary. So, it's a story that's not just limited to "great authors".

Oneself—myself.

I don't think that I can really remember what it was like when I was that young, and it's hard to say that I'm constantly focusing on whose child I am.

"What was important to you as a child becomes less and less important. The things that you used to think were amazing become ordinary clichés. Family should be everything, but becomes just another part of the world. A mother's love that envelops you like a vast sea is a narrow well—in all honesty, if that's what it means to grow up, there's something really lonely in that."

"..... I don't have any memory at all of you 'enveloping me in a mother's love'....."

"That's because you've forgotten."

""

I wonder if that's true...

"Just like you, I was once a child too, and I also forgot the time when my parents were raising me. All I remember is the books I read."

"The Hunting of the Snark?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> On May 19, 1987 Sheldon (Tiptree) committed suicide. She had been suffering from health issues caused by a lifetime of smoking and her husband was nearly blind, invalid, and no longer able to care for himself. She shot and killed her husband in his sleep before turning the gun on herself.

"Among others. Which books you've read and at what age, it's very important, don't you think? With people and with books, in the end, the time you encounter them is everything."

"... But there are times when we forget the books that we've read."

I didn't like the feeling of her lecturing me without saying anything back, so as a token effort, I made a rebuttal—although, it is the truth in its own way. Indiscriminate readers like Senjougahara-senpai and I, who read books like drinking water, completely forget the books we read a long time ago and end up reading the same ones two or even three times.

"It's fine if that's the case, isn't it? While the things that were important to you as a child might become less important—those books that you used to think were neither good nor bad might become interesting when you've grown up."

"I wonder. That might be true, but I wonder if that means that I've matured as a reader."

I guess if you say that the timing of the encounter is important, it will be. Then, my mother shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, perhaps, the books might be the ones maturing—in this case, maybe it should be 'aging' rather than 'maturing'."

"Aging...?"

"The radical travel diary written one hundred years ago, as a result of the author's daughter becoming a great author afterwards, now shines in a different light. You need to follow that example, too. It might be *The Only Neat Thing to Do* for you.

In short.

My mother, Kanbaru Tooe, laughed with a grin and said,

"If you can't be medicine, be poison. Otherwise, you're just plain water."



The reason I decided to purge the Swamp God, as you may all have guessed, was that it was interfering with my wholesome and sound business ventures. What a despicable god, destroying without a second thought all the sincere and faithful hard work I had been humbly doing in good conscience over the years as a productive member of society. I had no choice but to proactively engage in some defensive measures against the Swamp God in order to protect my rights. Of course, that sincerity and faith was in money and the rights I was protecting were my rights to deception. And of course, none of this was done on my nonexistent good conscience. Though none of this changes the fact that claiming so in my good conscience is perfectly within my sincere and faithful rights.

But no, even if that weren't the case, even if one of the lies in the web of lies that were the charms I had been spreading with all my might, my storm of wild rumors, once they had all completely disappeared, I would have to start fresh, having neither gained nor lost anything.

"Don't worry about it", "Just leave it be", "Pretend you don't know anything about it", "What will be will be", "Forget about it", "It's not like you're going to die or something"

... The Swamp God had used these words to render my charms useless, so I had something to say back to her.

"Hey there, Kaiki-san."

The Swamp God said as she welcomed me. Surprisingly enough, although you could hardly say she was very serious about it, the person revered as a god and who bathed in the adoration of all the middle school students in the area was a kid with bleached brown hair wearing sweatpants. Her bleached hair seemed more like a way to torment her body rather than a fashion-conscious decision<sup>61</sup> about her appearance.

"? How do you know my name. I don't remember knowing any kids as rotten as you."

"Hahaha, you see, I've been having lots of talks with the kids who've been getting involved with you, Kaiki Deishuu-san. 'Kai' like a heap of shells and 'ki' like a dead tree. Deishuu like 'dorobune', a boat stuck in the mud. I always thought they were just exaggerating when they said you were like bad luck grew a pair of arms and legs. Seems pretty spot on to me."

The Swamp God said with a little chuckle, then took a pack of gum out of the pockets of her sweatpants. Then, still with that frivolous smirk on her face but a sharp tone, she said, not taking a single step back,

"You must be a pretty horrible adult, tricking kids like that."

"What we're doing is practically the same. Although unlike me, you might say that you're tricking people but only an idiot would fall for your tricks."

"I'm just throwing stuff against the wall and seeing what sticks, still ironing out the kinks you know? I didn't grow up tricking people or getting conned myself so I'm still a beginner. I know you're a pro and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Bleached hair used to be, and still is, a sort of youthful and rebellious hairstyle in Japan.

all so give me a break if I'm not exactly a master con artist yet. I'm really sorry if my little child's play is getting in the way of your con scheme. I really am."

I've never heard less sincere words. And that's coming from someone without a speck of a conscience. On a whim or maybe because I was getting a bit annoyed, I decided to flatter the kid a little.

"Don't be so humble, you're actually not bad. You even managed to weed out all the rumors I've been spreading around. I learned a thing or two I might use in the future."

I had said that on a whim to have her think I was really complimenting her, but that might not actually be a bad idea. A conman's repertoire only grows by incorporating young new ideas. But I guess an elementary school kid's would still be too young.

"I'm not in elementary school. I actually graduated middle school a while ago."

"Is that so, all you kids look the same when you get to my age."

"A lot of people tell me I'm hard to approach because I act like an adult."

"I think that just means they don't like you. I know someone quite like that."

"Hmm... Someone like that, eh? Whatever."

The Swamp God popped five pieces of gum out of the package she had been playing with in her hand all at once and threw them into her mouth. Kids these days, no manners, but I guess chewing gum is her way of getting herself fired up.

"Want one?"

"I don't like candy. I'm an adult. A grown-up. The only thing adults want is money, or promises. I'll be fine if you promise me you won't get in the way of my business anymore."

"Sure thing. Got it. I won't get in your way anymore."

On the surface she promised me right away. But as a professional in telling lies, I've never seen a more obvious lie. It was more like she had

just come to ask me to maintain the status quo between us going forward into the future.

What else would it be.

From my point of view, the Swamp God's silly "life counseling" is starting to be a real problem for my business. But from her point of view, the lovely little con I've been spreading around like the plague is the only reason she can still go around doing her misfortune collection.

Our goals are completely different.

Like they say, the doctor's only in business because people get sick. Although the only way the Swamp God can treat her patients is with the placebo effect.

"Unfortunately, it appears negotiations have broken down. My only option now is to crush you so mercilessly you'll never be able to do business here again."

"You aren't very mature for an adult are you."

She didn't flinch an inch from my threat. I suppose this is what they mean by "bending but never breaking". Or maybe she thinks I'm not serious. If so, that would be correct. Really, even I have no idea when I'm being serious. Maybe I never am.

"No need to be so forward, Kaiki Deishuu-san. Want to give my 'life counseling' a try? See what it's like to throw all of your troubles into my deep swamp."

"Throw my troubles into your deep swamp? Are you trying to act like a ghost or something?"

"'Get outta my swamp!', I guess that's more like a swamp monster.<sup>62</sup> Deishuu, like a boat stuck in the mud... Mud and swamp. Muddy swamp, muddy swamp."

The Swamp God laughed at her own incomprehensible joke. She really did look like she was still in elementary school when she laughed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> She's pretending to be *Dorotabou* (泥田坊), a monster in an old folktale who would appear night after night from a rice paddy (which are very muddy at the bottom) and scream "Give me back my field!". His name literally means "Muddy Field Boy".

Did she say she already graduated from middle school? Now that I think about it, she looks like she could be in high school... Actually, no she doesn't. I have no reason to give her the benefit of the doubt, but even with it she looks like she's in middle school at best. I suppose looks don't count for much.

"No matter what you drop in, I can't give you back a golden axe<sup>63</sup> or a silver axe or something. I'm not cut out for being a goddess. All I am is a Swamp God."

"Are you offering to take my misfortune then?"

The Swamp God listens to people's tales of their misfortune then quietly takes them away. It doesn't accept any compensation in return, which I don't particularly agree with but long story short, misfortune itself is what it takes as its compensation. Or so the story goes.

"Interesting."

I said, because it wasn't interesting at all.

"Alright, so hear me out. Right now I've actually got something on my mind that's really troubling me. It keeps me up all night and it's making me miserable. So just until a while ago I've been dating this girl in high school, but she found out I was only in it for the money and I've been on the lam ever since. I'm going crazy looking over my shoulder all day thinking she's going to come and stab me or something, which is why I started doing all these bad things I never wanted to. It takes the edge off my nerves, you know. What do you think I should do?"

I had just thought that story up on the spot and I realized what an unrealistic situation it was to be asking for advice about. But the Swamp God paid no attention to my painfully obvious lie.

"Don't worry about it."

She said.

.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> She's referencing one of Aesop's *Fables* called *The Honest Woodman*, where a man drops his axe into a river and the god Hermes pulls a golden axe then a silver axe out of the river, and asks the man whether they are his to test his honesty.

"Just leave it be, pretend you don't know anything about it, what will be will be, forget about it, it's not like you're going to die or something. Got it?"

"... I'm sure that's what you tell everyone, but she actually told me she's going to kill me, you know?"

I was hoping to put some pressure on the Swamp God with a serious request, something a kid couldn't just brush off with some clever words. And so I told lie after lie.

"Even if I forget about it, she's never going to let me off the hook for the rest of her life."

"Not really, you're not really all that important to her. You're right that she might really want to kill you now, but eventually some nice guy is going to come along and heal the wounds you gave her."

"…"

"She's not even as hurt as you think. You'll be a memory in the past in no time. So, don't worry about it."

She had no proof for anything she was saying. All she was doing was going along with her usual plan, I could tell. She was certainly an inexperienced beginner and not exactly very eloquent in her speech, but she was still running a fine con. I was just flattering her before, but this kid could probably trick most adults too.

But not me, obviously.

I doubt there's really some "nice guy" out there who'd make a good couple with her, and "she" doesn't even exist in the first place. She doesn't exist.

That said, having seen her techniques, I couldn't just leave without showing her anything in return. I may love money, but I don't like being in debt.

"Swamp God. Since we're both here, why don't I show you some of my techniques."

"No thanks, I'm fine. I'm not interested in any charms."

"Come on, it doesn't have to be right away or anything. I'm thinking we might have a long way to go with each other in the future." "I'm glad you think so, let's hope the both of us do well. So, what are you going to do?"

"Relax, it's nothing dangerous. I was just thinking of introducing a customer to you that I think you'd be able to help sometime not too long from now. I think you've got a lot of potential, that's all."

"A customer? You want to set up a barter agreement with me or something?"

I said nothing in reply to the Swamp God's question.

In place of a response, I said

"It's really something I should be doing, but I get tired of things quickly and I'm not really cut out for collection. So I'm letting you take the job, I'm trusting you with it."

"Swamp God, one day all the misfortune that's been sitting at the bottom in you is going to pile up and appear on the surface. And you'll run into some friends you forgot about. That's the lesson you should learn from meeting me. So when that time comes,"

Make sure you don't miss it.

The Swamp God had a suspicious look on her face. She was probably bracing herself not to be tricked, but in reality that was completely useless.

She had already tricked herself into thinking her life wasn't full of misfortune.

By taking in other people's misfortune.

I didn't have to do a thing to trick her.

Not to mention I have no duty to open up her eyes. But because one day I will have to take on that duty.

Swamp God.

Let me give you a devil.



To me, Oshino Shinobu is a special existence.

So very special that she is more like a part of my body—of course, it is not that she is a part of my body; it is more like I'm a part of her body; no matter which, we are one in body and soul, and as inseparable as two sides of a coin, with advantages and disadvantages to it; we have a bond that will not be broken.

Leaving out all the details of how it came to be that way, it will suffice to say that for Araragi Koyomi, the little blond girl, the little girl yet an enchantress, Oshino Shinobu is in various ways and in every way more important than his own heart. That much is certain.

Still, no matter how indispensable a presence she may be, it cannot be said that it would be good if there was suddenly more than one of her—so, what I want to say is, one day, suddenly, there were two Shinobus.

Standing next to each other, quietly, in the same pose.

This silent atmosphere where she is just looking at me is making me think fondly that, if only that hat she's wearing was a helmet, it would be like how she used to sit quietly in the corner of that cram school hugging her knees—though having said that, this is not the time to be thinking fondly about the past.

"Huh, the number of Shinobus has increased to two? What is this situation?"

"Calm down, Devilish Big Brother. One of them is just an image of the other—as one of them is the Nendoroid made by Good Smile Company."

Ononoki-chan was by my side as though it was normal, the shikigami girl Ononoki Yotsugi-chan, said that in an expressionless intonation.

"Wha—WHHAAAATTTT? One of them is a Nendoroid made by Good Smile Company!?"

It can't be, no matter how much I compare them I can't spot any differences.

Even I, who is a "Oshino Shinobu professional", cannot tell which is the real one and which is the figure.

No matter how much I narrow my eyes and look at them, I cannot say anything but that they are exactly the same.

Though I had heard rumors of it, what a fearsome Nendoroid, what a frightening reproduction!

"If such goods are being sold, people will be compelled to buy it... I told that to Good Smile"

"This is fine, Devilish Big Brother. If it's you, you can surely tell which is the real one."

Ononoki-chan patted me on the back with all her strength, to encourage me—the heartless way she used so much strength to hit me in the back might be an expression of anger due to the olden ways of speaking she has been used to.

"For you, Devilish Big Brother, the former Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, that is, Oshino Shinobu is a special loli existence, right?" 64

"Special! What is a special loli? Don't notice the fact that 'loli' is included in 'special'.<sup>65</sup> It will make it difficult to use the word 'special' from now on, won't it? How frequently used a word do you think it is? Will saying 'it doesn't matter' now become 'loli doesn't matter'? Will 'extraordinary' become 'every loli'?<sup>66</sup> What does it mean?"

Hmm, I looked at the two Shinobus again—the identical Shinobus just stayed silent and didn't move a muscle.

It's really like her early character.

I see, they truly are the splitting image of each other—still, for each situation there is a different approach to use.

Anyhow, as this is only a short story; as more than twenty volumes of the story have passed, this story's setting will also fit into that so that it can be read with it.

"Ku ku ku..."

I laughed fearlessly like that.

Perhaps, all of this is a bad trick being played on me by Ononoki-chan and Shinobu together (though the vampire and the zombie have a bad relationship with each other, when the goal is to play a trick on me they become little girls who join hands), and it's all the worse for their opponent.

Maybe it is that kind of setting, or an obligatory dramaturgy—in a story like this, there is a possibility that both Shinobus are dolls.

And while I'm trying to guess correctly, the real one will appear behind me. I'm sure this is the setting, but unfortunately for them, I'm one step ahead of them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Instead of saying 特別 (*tokubetsu*, "special"), Ononoki says 特ロリ (*tokuloli*) which Araragi runs with.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> The characters for "loli" (ロリ) are included in the kanji for "special" (別).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Here, Araragi transforms 別 into ロリ in the phrases 別にいいです(*betsuni ii desu*, "it doesn't matter") and 別格 (*bekkaku*, "extraordinary").

"To think you've bought two Good Smile Company Nendoroids just to surprise me... Well, the quality is such that it makes you think there are two Shinobus, I won't deny that."

"The sales talk has gone for too long now, Devilish Big Brother." "Which is it?"

Saying that, I reached out with both my hands towards both the figures—no matter how similar they look, there's no way that they could have reproduced how Shinobu's skin feels.

That is, if I touch and see, I'll be able to find the answer—really, this is too easy that I feel I'm being teased.

Well, for a student who's preparing for his entrance exams, this has been a stimulating event—as it was fun for me, as a reward I might even buy some of her favorite donuts.

And while thinking such generous thoughts, I struck my hand into their one-piece dress from the back...

"Uhyauu!?"
"Uhyauu!?"

The both of them screamed at the same time.

"What?"

What?

Can a figure yell?

"How are you touching me, you idiot? Don't rub my back!"

"How are you touching me, you idiot? Don't rub my back!"

"Vampire Punch!"

"Vampire Punch!"

I received two vampire punches at the same time.

An uppercut to the jaw, which is one of the five vital points in the human body, has a quite fatal destructive force by itself; to take two of those punches is not a simple thing—unable to bear it, I was blown back.

With minimal movement, Ononoki-chan moved out of the way as I was blown back. Why are you moving away, you should support me as I fall!

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"Wha-what ...?"
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As I was rubbing my head and descending into total confusion, I noticed that both figures were teary-eyed in battle mode, breathing heavily and glaring at me.

It was not only the shout, but also the feeling under my two palms right before that, and the spines that I felt through their skin!

"You got caught, didn't you, Devilish Big Brother? The punch line of the trick this time was that both are real."

"As if someone could understand something like that!"

"She became two using her vampire powers."

"Can she do something like that?!"

This vampire power, it's just too powerful, isn't it?

"Ka ka."

"Ka ka."

Maybe it was the disgraceful sight of me panicking—the two Shinobus dropped their fighting stances and laughed together.

"It is a simple thing. If you are an iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire like me."

"It is a simple thing. If you are an iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire like me."

"A... Amazing."

Hmmm... There's nothing to do but admire her.

Wait, you can perform time-slips, you can multiply, though you say it is a vampire power, right now you are not a vampire or anything.

If she can do all that, she could have used them in the problems we faced... Why use it to play tricks?

Was she unwilling to use it or not...

"Ca—Can I also do something like that?"

"To have two of you, what sort of hell is that? Who wrote that sort of a scene? Just die."

While I was being scolded severely like that by Ononoki-chan (did I say something so bad that I deserve to die for it?), the two Shinobus changed the subject as a duo saying "by the way, you" "by the way, you"—though it was as a duo, it was the exact same tone.

It seems like, in the near future, I will be feeling an inexpressible and bottomless uneasiness.

"This... How do I go back to being one again?"

"This... How do I go back to being one again?"

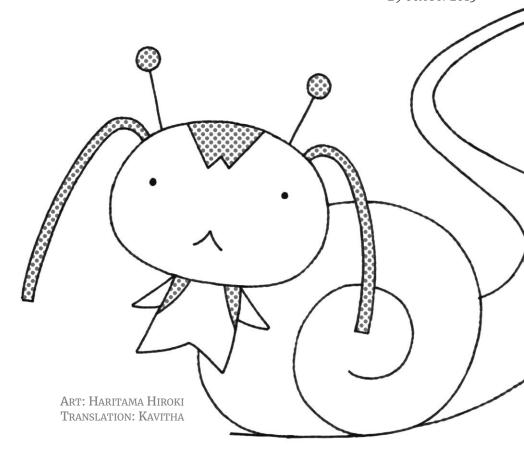
"... So that's the punch line."

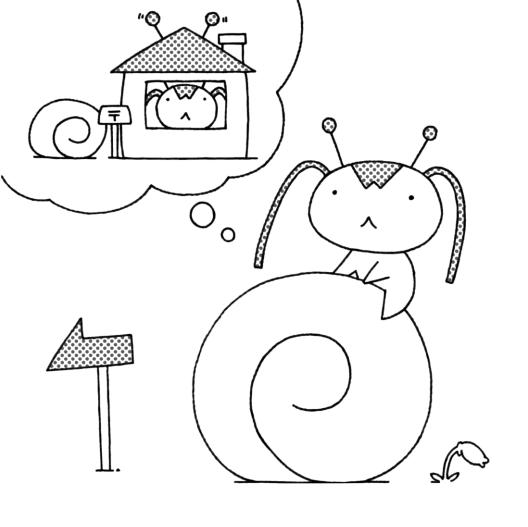
And so.

The little blond girl who is a very special existence to me; became two—maybe the figure in your hands is also a real one who has become unable to turn back.

## THE STRAY SNAIL

HEROINE BOOK 2: HACHIKUJI MAYOI 29 October 2013





Long, long ago, there lived a lost snail.

"I don't have a home to go back to.

I want a home to go back to."

The snail started on a long trip to find its home.

"I once used to reside in a stately mansion.

But that home is no longer there.

It is not there anywhere in this world."

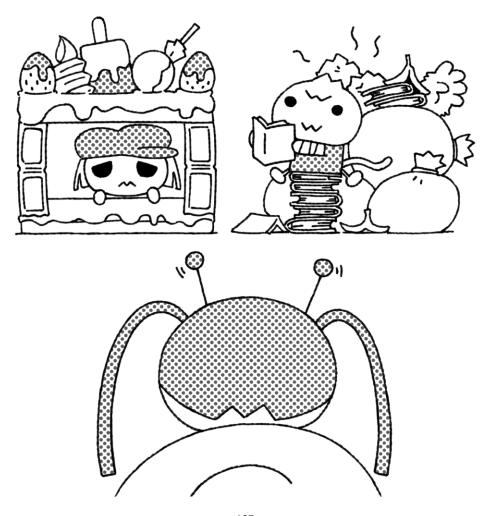




The snail knew that such homes also existed.

Strange houses and ruined mansions. There were different kinds of homes.

But no matter how much it searched, the snail couldn't find its home.





"If that is the case, it is easy"

"From today, I am your home"

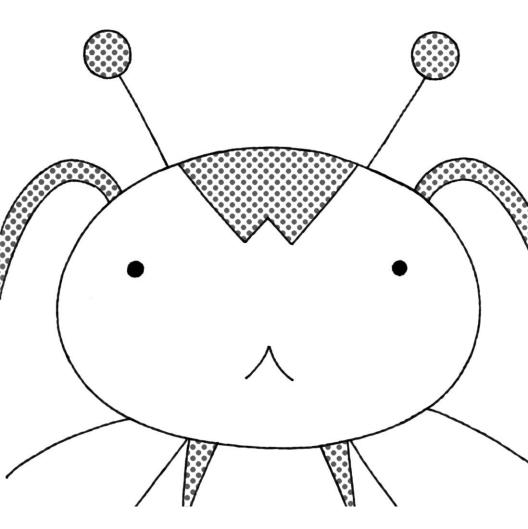


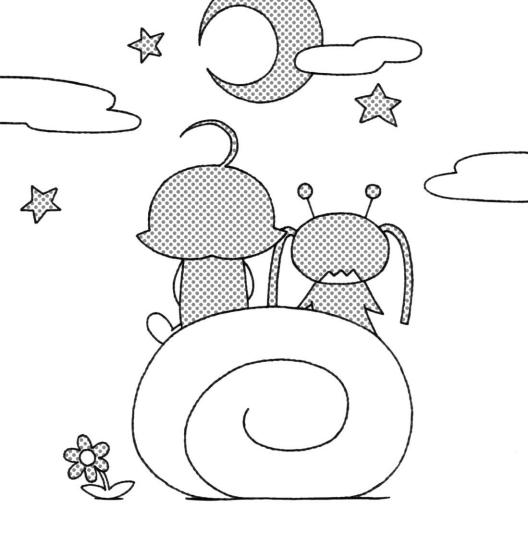
"When you want to be reassured"

"When you want to feel safe"

"When you want to be happy, come to me"

"I will always be looking forward to you coming back"





Though she did not find the home that she was searching for, the snail found a family.

The End.



Brushing her teeth is a girl's dedication, her daily ritual. But something becoming a habit also means that you become oblivious to changes. I, Araragi Karen, hadn't been aware of that, not until that day, that morning, and that time, when I felt it.

"Ow!"

"What is it, Karen-chan? My dear sister?"

My brother, hearing his sister's scream, came rushing into the bathroom. I pulled the toothbrush out of my mouth and explained myself.

"I—It's nothing! My back teeth don't hurt at all. I don't have a cavity. So I don't have to go to the dentist."

"So your back teeth hurt, you have a cavity and have to go to the dentist, huh..."

My brother looked at me compassionately.

To look at your sister with such sorrowful eyes...

"N—No! There's no way I'm going! We don't even know for sure whether I have a cavity yet!"

"People with cavities always deny that they have them, for some reason... Just face the reality. I mean, why is someone like you, who's brawling all the time, afraid of the dentist? Being punched in the face is a lot more painful than a cavity, right?"

My brother was right, but, but this is just not something you can rationalize.

If you don't like something you don't like it, and if you're afraid of something then you're afraid of it. Dammit, how could I get a cavity even though I brush my teeth every morning and evening? I feel like I wasted some serious time and effort.

"Is that so... Well, if you really don't want to go, then I'll respect that, as your brother."

He shrugged, giving in.

Hm? What did he mean by that?

"You might be afraid of the dentist, but you're not afraid of your brother, right? I'll examine you, so come with me." my brother said, grinning and turning his head beckoning me.

Wow, just as I'd expect of him! So reliable!

"OK, so undress your upper body and lie down on the bed." demanded my brother, equipping himself with a surgical mask and an apron, just as he had taken me into his room.

What? Undress? Why would I have to do that when he's not even going to use a stethoscope?

"What are you saying, you moron. Spit and blood could fly out while I'm examining your cavity. Your precious tracksuit could get dirty!"

"Oh, right! I see! Just as expected of my big bro, you're so clever!"

Having heard that perfect explanation that left no room for any further doubts, I quickly took my tracksuit, T-shirt and sports bra off all at once and stretched out on the bed. I folded the pillow and used it as a headrest.

However, this is still a bit embarrassing, after all...

Getting naked in front of my brother again...

"What are you talking about again, you moron. If you go to a real dentist, they'll take an X-ray. They won't look at your naked body, but right through you, down to your bones! If you think about that, what's the deal with exposing your upper body?"

He was right. I really had scales falling from my eyes.

I do get the feeling that maybe I should be wearing the apron he's wearing right now, and *maybe* it would've been better to be honest with myself and go to a dentist rather than getting myself treated by an amateur, but well, my big bro can't do anything wrong!

... For some reason he was very smooth about that, but didn't he say something about blood flying out?

"Don't worry. I've studied quite a bit about the oral cavity since the last time I brushed your teeth."

Why don't you study for your entrance exams.

Even though you're my brother, when you're standing there beside my bed, wearing a surgical mask, an apron and without a dental license, your pervert level goes up significantly.

"Assistant!"

As the perverted quack snapped his fingers, a little girl in a white lab coat appeared from somewhere. A little girl, about 6 years old. I could see that she was blond from the few stray hairs peeking out from behind the mask and cap she wore, but they otherwise made it impossible to tell who she was at all. Quite unlike my brother, she looked beautiful even with the mask on.

But hey, who even is that?

A stranger little girl in our house... She has to be quite the *enfant* terrible!<sup>67</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> "Enfant terrible" (アンファンテリブル, *anfan teriburu*) is a French expression (literally meaning "unruly child") that originally refers to a child who embarrasses his parents with candid remarks, but evolved to describe a successful artist or creative "genius" who compromises his associates by acting unconventionally or offensively.

"Don't worry. This is my assistant I hired in exchange for three French crullers."

Now I'm worried! He hired this dental assistant for a shockingly low wage which could be less than 300 yen, depending on the circumstances! The little girl, no, the assistant, silently pushed a cart in.

I couldn't see very well lying down, but in the metal tray on top were, unexpectedly, various dentist's tools.

A dental mirror, a scraper, a pin set.

Also, some other tools I didn't know the name of.

"Names? Those are surgical scissors, for example."

"That sounds like a weapon already!"68

"You use it to cut the gums."

"It's a torturing tool, more or less!"

Ignoring my remarks, the assistant prepared different things around the bed. She went about setting up electronic devices like an ultrasonic scaler (the one that goes "screech") a drill (the one that goes "grrrrr"), surgical lights... Where on Earth had genuine medical equipment like this been hiding around our house? It was almost as if it were hidden inside of someone's shadow.

There didn't seem to be water-supplying equipment for gargling after all, but in place of that, there was a wash bowl.

"You're not going to pull out my teeth with things that look like pliers, right?"

"Hmph. By the way, because 'pulling teeth' and 'removing stitches' are homonyms in Japanese, the latter is referred to in a slightly different way among dentists." my brother said, demonstrating knowledge that

<sup>68</sup> Koyomi uses a very technical term when referring to the tool, 歯肉剪刀 (*shiniku sentou*). Karen probably says that it sounds like a weapon because it has 刀, the character for "sword" or "dagger" (among others), in it.

didn't make it sound like he was actually knowledgeable, but had just memorized something.<sup>69</sup>

"Well, I can't tell you anything before I've had a look, but if I pull out teeth I'm going to use an escalator, so it's OK."

"Escalator?"

Is that some kind of system like at the Tsuga-no-ki middle school I'm going to, that lets you progress smoothly to high school? Does that mean that you can pull out teeth just as smoothly?

"In Japanese, you write it 'levver'. It's something like a flathead screwdriver."

"So it's just a screwdriver then!"

You read it as "lever", normally!70

Don't pull out your sister's teeth using the lever principle!

"Really? Well, then I won't pull your teeth. Even though I want to aim for a complete cure while I'm at it anyway..."

Complete cure? Well, since he's examining me anyway, I also want to be cured completely, but...

"By the way, with 'complete cure' we mean a treatment with root canal therapy. It's a type of treatment where a thin needle is used to scrape out the nerves from beneath the tooth's roots." muttered the assistant in a strangely old-fashioned way.<sup>71</sup>

Technical dentist speech is so confusing!

"OK, open your mouth."

"Aaah..."

.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> The words used here in the original are 抜歯 (*basshi*, "pulling teeth") and 抜 糸 (*basshi*, "removing stitches"). In order to avoid confusion, the latter is also pronounced *batsuito*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> This doesn't make sense in English and other alphabetic languages, where you can see how a word is written and pronounced when you look at it. In Japanese, Koyomi wrongly pronounces the word 梃子 as *teishi*, when it is really pronounced *teko* (which Karen points out).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> When he brings up the "complete cure", Koyomi uses the term 根治 (*konji*), which means just that. Shinobu, however, subsequently says that 根治 is actually an abbreviation for 根管治療 (*konkan chiryou*, "root canal therapy").

I opened my mouth, doing as I was told.

Was I following my brother's orders a bit too thoughtlessly?

"I said it before, but your teeth are really beautiful. If you look at the backsides with a mirror, their beauty really stands out."

I don't get embarrassed easily, but even my sense of shame kicks in when thinking of how the backsides of my teeth are being looked at with a mirror. I have the feeling that, in a sense, having every part of your mouth examined is even more embarrassing than exposing your upper body...

"Hey, you have thirty-two teeth. Your third molars, they're out, all four of them."

"Fhwat? Weally?"

I tilted my head, with my mouth still open.

I never stare at the inside of my mouth, so I hadn't even realized that.

"The third molars normally start coming out when you're about my age... But well, you're growing fast here and there, I guess" my brother said adoringly, softly stroking my breasts and continuing with the examination. Wait, did my brother really just, without any hesitation, grope his sister's breasts?

"Speaking of which, the third molars are also called wisdom teeth. Since you have already all four of them, aren't you already a wise lady for your age?"<sup>72</sup>

Being flattered like that made me feel better!

Because of that, I'm generously going to pretend the feeling of having my breast groped was only my imagination.

"Assistant!"

The little girl, called upon by my brother, carelessly pulled at my lips. Oh, my lips are turned inside out! Having the fingers of several people being stuffed into your mouth *really* feels like you're being messed around with.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> In Japan, wisdom teeth are generally called 親知らず (*oyashirazu*). Directly translated, it means "[the teeth which] your parents don't know about".

Why do they seem to have some kind of telepathic connection, these two?!

Really, who is this blond little girl?

Having not only my brother, but also a small girl of the same gender tormenting me sets my alarm bells off. Because my chest is out, they could see how fast my heart's beating! Embarrassing! What really may be embarrassing is that I'm exposing my chest in front of a little girl I don't even know, but...

"Wisdom teeth are hard to reach with a brush, so cavities can form pretty quickly there. But yours are all grown out neatly, so it seems like we don't have to worry about that... Hmmm, Karen-chan, I can't find a single cavity on your back teeth, let alone your front teeth" said my brother, after having fumbled around mercilessly in another person's mouth.

Eh? Really? I don't have a cavity? Well, if that really was the case, that'd be really good, but...

"From one to eight, they're all As."

Wait, teeth with cavities are called Cs, but you don't really call teeth without them As.

The amateur is exposing himself.

Hm, was it just a case of hypersensitivity, then?

I don't know what kind of condition hypersensitivity is, but...

"Wait, wait, it's too early to come to a conclusion already, Karenchan. Even if your teeth are fine, there could be a problem with your gums."

"My gums? So, you're not going to use the surgical scissors you talked about earlier, right?"

That really makes me shudder.

Having your gums cut open... I'd rather have my teeth pulled out...

"Sometimes, the gums swell up from the same bacteria that are causing cavities. The gums are the flesh that holds the teeth, so normally, they are tight like this" said my brother, stroking my abs, and then continued "and when they're affected by the bacteria, they swell up like this", stroking my breasts.

He really groped them this time! And pretty firmly at that!

It had been hard to miss.

"Because of that, I'll check your periodontal pockets. Assistant!"

Doesn't he just want to say "assistant"...?

However, the little girl assistant, as if a reward of three donuts were something very desirable, brought the medicine my brother had silently requested.

Medicine? He's going to use medicine? An amateur?

"Come on, it's just wax. I'll put it on your lips so that they don't get hurt."

Is he going to do something that would hurt my lips? To his sister?

Without worrying about that, my brother spread the wax on my lips with his little finger. Because he had scooped it up with his little finger, he way he spread it felt really fetishistic.

"Assistant! No, no, not that, that's the bone file."

Don't mistake something for a tool with that dangerous of a name!

You could understand each other just fine without words up to this moment, why now?

However, the tool that was handed over to my brother instead didn't look very safe either... Well, most dentist tools are pointy.

"This is called a probe. It's a tool that measures the depth of your periodontal pockets. I'm going to check your gums by poking them with the tip of this."

Why does he say it like that...

Are you really going to poke at something that could be swollen up with a sharp object like this?

"If it hurts, please scream."

"You mean I should raise my right hand or something, right!?"

"Well then, I'll start with the front teeth. Here we go."

"Ah! Oh! A-A-Ah!"

I didn't let out a scream, but weird sounds.

Having an unknown area—somewhere where nobody had ever touched me, even deeper and further inside than the inside of my mouth—poked at, made my delicate pride fall apart.

I'm being played with.

But, that feeling of having given up everything defenselessly... doesn't feel necessarily bad at all!

"Hmmm, I could get used to this..." my brother was also opening up to some weird feelings... If it went on like this, an accident from the past could repeat itself. Because there are three people (one of them a little girl) and an assortment of special tools this time, it feels significantly worse.

"I have to practice this for the day I'll do this to a beloved person." Don't use the mouth of your sister as something to practice on! And don't do this to a beloved person.

"Assistant, the cotton rolls, please. I'll stuff those into Karen-chan's mouth."

This time, my brother properly named what he wanted so the assistant wouldn't make a mistake again, but what is a cotton roll?

Don't stuff some dubious stuff into my mouth, OK?

My heart had been fluttering, but cotton rolls were just those cylinder-shaped pieces of cotton after all.<sup>73</sup> Those things that you use to create spaces inside of the mouth so that it becomes easier to examine it. Having my lips pulled apart by the little girl assistant had become pretty painful, so I was happy to have those.

"Fugou!"

The voice I let out this time wasn't even weird, but just ugly... If you just go by the words, you'd think of some wealthy guy, but if you had

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Sounds strange in English, but Koyomi first uses the term ロールワッテ (*rouru watte*) here. Because *watte* is a foreign word (it comes from German, meaning "cotton"), you don't immediately know what it is in Japanese.

five pieces of cotton stuffed in your mouth all at once, everyone would react that way.<sup>74</sup>

That quack doctor (even though he's a false doctor!)

Looking at myself in the mirror attached to the surgical light, I saw my face was all deformed and it looked like I was being prepared for some mysterious kind of role!

Then it came.

The pain that had been suppressed by being ogled and pricked by my brother grew stronger again. At that pain that really felt like my nerves were being scraped out directly, I threw my head back on reflex.

I spit out all the cotton.

"A—Are you OK, Karen-chan? Assistant, do we have a syringe or anesthetics?"

Stop.

Stop that, please.

I was more afraid of being given an injection by an amateur than being punched or having a cavity!

... However, directly piercing the part where it hurts and injecting anesthetics... Dentists do some crazy stuff.

"Eye doctors do stuff like injecting something into the back of the eyelid. Even someone like me, who desperately wants to lick Hanekawa's eyes, thinks that that's a bit too much."

"...."

I shivered, having come to know that there was someone in my family that had the egregious, no, repugnant desire to lick his classmate's eyes.

That fact became a mental anesthesia for me, and I was able to forget the pain for a moment.

Having patients forget their pains... This false doctor could, surprisingly, be a genius!

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> The sound Karen makes here, ふごうっ (*fugou*) sounds like 富豪 (*fugou*, "wealthy person").

Well, among doctors without a license, there are people like Black Jack, after all... You could even say that judging from her appearance, that little girl assistant looks like Pinoko dragging along scrubs.<sup>75</sup>

"Is that so. Well, then I don't have to inject you with anesthetics I guess..."

My brother looked a bit disappointed saying that.

Wanting to give your sister an anesthetic injection is a pretty disgusting desire in itself... Why should the main character fall apart just because the series ended?

"Hey, I just wanted to see my sister, unable to properly close her mouth due to the injection, having drool and leftover food dribble from the sides of her mouth."

"Oh, so that's what it was! I'm relieved!"

"But there also seems to be nothing wrong with your periodontal pockets... Your gums are just as tight as those abs."

As if to compare them to the texture of my gums, my brother caressed my muscles. You know, just because they're abs that doesn't mean you can touch them, OK?

"Hmm, so maybe it was hypersensitivity after all. That's a problem in and of itself, but..."

Diagnosing me like that, my brother poked the back of my palate with the scraper.

"Ah, ah" I said, reacting overly sensitively. No, I don't know the real definition, but that's not what hypersensitivity means, right?

Don't get addicted to poking around in your sister's mouth with a needle.

"OK, so then let's end the treatment for now and just make some provisions." said my brother like a real dentist.

But wait, does provision mean that he's going to brush my teeth again, like that one time? Is he going to brush them?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> *Black Jack* is an anime that revolves around an unlicensed surgeon named Black Jack healing other people while charging high fees. He has an assistant named Pinoko.

He chuckled. "Even more than that!"

Even more than that!?

"Karen-chan, unlike that day, I'm a dentist today. I'm not going to just brush your teeth!"

How reliable! Even though you're not a dentist today either! Even though you're the same big brother, just like that day!

"When it comes to cavities, taking precautions is important. I've prepared not only a normal toothbrush, but also an electric one, interdental brushes and even floss. I'm going to make your teeth sparkle, distal to medial!"

I'm going to be made sparkly!

My brother tightened the thread of floss like some kind of killer... Overflowing with the healthy courage of wanting to brush his sister's teeth.

No, that's not healthy.

But... Since he's brushing my teeth, isn't it healthy after all?76

"OK, open your mouth wide! Stick your tongue out!"

"Aaah"

"The backside of a tongue really kinda looks like exposed intestines..."

Is that what you say to someone who just stuck out her tongue?

He says that like he has seen exposed intestines before...

"Squishy-squishy"

Don't touch exposed intestines with a thread of floss!

I get the feeling my tongue's going to be cut off, even though I didn't even lie to anyone!

<sup>76</sup> Another wordplay based on homonyms. It has been translated here as "healthy courage" to help this part make some sense, but in Japanese, the expression used is 軒昂なる気概 (kenkou naru kigai, "high-spirited courage"). 軒昂 (kenkou, "high-spirited") and 健康 (kenkou, "health") are pronounced the same, so Karen is able to make a sneaky remark about her own narration here.

... It's pulled out if you're a liar, and it's cut off for... sparrows when they've eaten glue? Was that it?

"Screechy-screechy"

"Fwont himifate founs hike fhis! (Don't imitate sounds like this!)" I remarked with an expression in parentheses like in a manga, but my brother was fully occupied with cleaning the inside of my mouth. I didn't say anything else because I didn't want to be a hindrance... But that screeching made it sound like my teeth were being cut off with a saw...

Entrusting him with the spaces between my teeth, even harder to reach than their back side even for a real dentist... That ultimate passiveness let a feeling bloom in my bosom, a feeling I'd never savored before, a feeling without a name... Just when I was about to drown in that feeling...

"Blurgh! Blurghgurhulh!"

I literally drowned.

I wasn't able to tell what happened to me.

I was just as shocked as the first time I had been on the receiving end of a power move from my master or just as confused as when that conman did something to me.

How could I drown if I was on land? I was really confused, but once I noticed it, it was clear what was happening to my body.

The little girl assistant at the side of the bed had, without me noticing it, put a strange electric apparatus in my mouth and was releasing a torrent of water from it.

"Three-way syringe."

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Karen is referring to the traditional fable of the Tongue-Cut Sparrow (舌切り雀, *shita-kiri suzume*), where a kind old man helps an injured sparrow, but his avaricious wife cuts off the bird's tongue after discovering it ate some glue that was meant to repair a ladder even though she had no intention of feeding it.

The little girl uttered, in a noble voice, the name of the device that sounded like a move in a fantasy battle—no, I was the one with that thing in her mouth.<sup>78</sup>

So that's what it was! I didn't know its name, but it's that tool which can shoot out water, mist and air! But even then, the torrent is way too strong! No, too much!

Don't shower my mouth with a stream of water so strong that it's affecting the narrative parts of the story!

Does that assistant dislike me? Could it be that she tried to pass that dangerous-sounding thing earlier on purpose?

"Hah... My sister is lying on the bed, with a foaming mouth and drowning... I feel like drowning in that sight myself..."

This time, my brother looked like he was drowning in a nameless emotion (what a terrible reciprocal effect!), but he didn't forget his duties as a doctor (even if he's not really one) and issued an order towards the little assistant.

"Aspirator!"

Great, finally I'll be freed from this torrent of water... Hey, hwaaah! My tongue is being sucked at! She *really* is doing this on purpose, this little girl! What does this assistant even *assist* my brother in!?

"Electric toothbrush!"

Uwaaah! An amount of rotations that could never be reproduced by humans!

"Ultrasonic scaler!"

Nooo! My plaque is being removed by an orchestra of blackboard-scratching sounds resonating relentlessly in my skull!

"Inter-dental brush!"

Ow! The spaces between my teeth are cleaned vigorously, like test tubes in a laboratory!

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> In Japanese, Shinobu saying the name of the device is written with the verb 口にする (*kuchi ni suru*, literally "to take inside one's mouth", meaning "to say something"). That's why Karen adds that last bit of the sentence.

"Dental impression!"

Stop it! Don't test how I put my teeth together... Hm, this one doesn't really hurt or itch...

I just bit on a dry, thin piece of paper.

But then, as if to mock my short moment of carelessness, that pain overcame me for the third time. I spit out all the water in my mouth that the aspirator hadn't removed.

Spitting out all the water left in my mouth until nothing was left... In what seemed like a funny turn of events with a bit of rhetoric mixed in resulted in my brother, the little assistant and my upper body completely drenched.

Good thing I took off my jersey.

There also was a feeling of satisfaction that I had been able to strike back at the little assistant, who had tormented me so much. But a strong pain that I couldn't suppress with those feelings ran along the insides of my mouth.

Not able to lie on my back anymore, I did a somersault. But even then I couldn't get over the pain, it just grew.

"What is this, you don't have any cavities, right? Hm? Wait, maybe..." Wiping of the water I had spit on him with a towel, my brother did a eureka pose, like a doctor who had found a hidden lesion.

He's really exaggerating it.

"Karen-chan, I'll inspect you one more time."

"N—No. It hurts, it hurts. I don't want to anymore. I don't want to because it hurts."

"It's OK, I'll just poke your cheek a little."

Is he going to palpate from the outside of my cheek? Maybe that'll hurt too, but if he doesn't touch my teeth directly, I could deal with it, maybe.

"O-OK, then go ahead."

It was already hard to keep still for the palpation, but the little assistant grabbed my shoulder—me still being a bit dizzy from the

somersault—and forcibly pushed me down on my back. This little girl is really strong for some reason!

"So—Softly, OK? Poke me softly, OK?"

I was out of character regarding my choice of words, but I just feared the pain that much. My brother, smiling at his poor sister like that, said "Yeah, I'll do it softly" and poked my cheek.

From the inside.

"Uwaaaaaaaaah!"

I let out a scream and, before noticing it, bit my brother's finger.

I tasted my brother's finger, but compared to the lightning bolt of pain that had run alongside the inside of my cheek, it had been nothing special.

My brother growled, holding back the pain. As if he were used to being bitten (what kind of life is that?) he quickly pulled his finger from my mouth.

"Wha—Whatwhat? What did you do? Did you use your fingernails? Are you going to examine my scraped-off mucosal cells under a microscope?"

Being poked from the inside had been unexpected, but even then, why does having your cheek poked hurt so much?

"Karen-chan. You don't have cavities."

My brother presented his examination results, licking his finger like a swordmaster licks his blade. I'm sure he's doing that in order to ease the pain, but that finger was in my mouth until just now...

"N—No cavity? What is it then?"

"Mouth ulcer. An inflammation of the mouth mucosa. You're one of the Fire Sisters, after all."

Mouth ulcer? Because I'm one of the Fire Sisters?

Isn't that last bit unnecessary?

So that's why it hurt when I bit on the paper!

They say mouth ulcers tend to form where you're likely to bite!

Of course, it also hurt when I had the cotton put in—after all, I had it pressed on the affected part pretty hard.

As I was grasping the situation, the tension also went away.

It hurts just as much as a cavity, but looking into the future, it's not as bad at all! Maybe it'll even heal naturally.

I was happy that I didn't have to go to the dentist, but I couldn't help but think about the meaning of the farce that had been happening in this room.

"You have to properly care for the inside of the mouth, not only the teeth, gums and tongue." said my attending doctor, as if to wrap things up. But thinking about it, if it really is mouth ulcer, couldn't he have seen it without having to poke my cheek?

Well, I'll take that pain as punishment for not taking care of my mouth properly...

I wanted to get up, but the little assistant didn't let me go, keeping me pinned onto the bed.

Hm? Was there more?

"Of course. Even though it's just a mouth ulcer, you shouldn't underestimate it. If germs get in, it could become worse. As a finishing touch, I'm going to sterilize your mouth." said my brother and took out a small bottle of one-time use mouth wash. Alright, he wants me to gargle with that. That's where the wash bowl comes in.

Because he had been right about the mouth ulcer, I was going to obey him and stretched out my hand, but he didn't pass me the mini-bottle.

"Hey hey, Karen-chan, I don't think someone like you, who just spit out water like some kind of magician earlier, can properly gargle."

Hmm.

Feeling like I was being laughed at for not even being able to gargle was upsetting, but looking at my drenched body, I can't really argue against that.

It'd be unseemly to drool all over the place despite not even having been anesthetized. As someone with all her third molars—that is, her wisdom teeth—out, I should bow my head.

"But, what are you going to do then? Tell me, big bro."

"There's only one way. I'll sterilize your mouth..."

My brother stylishly flipped open the mouth wash's cap with his thumb and drank up the liquid in one go.

No, he only stored it in his cheeks.

"... by mouth-to-mouth feeding."

\*

"Whew! I managed to get my immortality-infused saliva all over Karen-chan's oral cavity. With that, no matter if it's cavities or mouth ulcers, there's no doubt it'll completely heal, right Shinobu?"

"You siblings are affected by something way worse."



Brushing her hair is a girl's dedication, her daily ritual. But something becoming a habit also means that you become oblivious to changes. I, Araragi Tsukihi, hadn't been aware of that, not until that day, that morning, and that time, when I felt it.

"Ow!"

"What is it, Tsukihi-chan? My dear sister?"

My brother, hearing his sister's scream, came rushing into the bathroom. I pulled the hairbrush out of my hair and explained myself.

"I stepped on my hair."

I began.

"It's already past my tips of my toes, so I guess I have to cut it now."

My brother had graduated from high school, and Nadeko-chan seemed to be on her way to recovering as well, so there was no point letting my hair grow out to wish for good luck for them. I felt like lopping it all off, nice and short this time. Maybe I could even style it like Nadeko-chan.

It was still early in the morning, more than enough time to make a reservation for today at a hair salon. I was actually quite a regular as well, so I could probably get some leeway. I hadn't done anything with my hair except for a few trims to keep the ends neat, so I could use a real styling at a beauty salon.

"So, brother."

"Yes?"

"Give me back my 30000 yen."

My brother stared at my outstretched hand, then began to turn around as if the monumentally important fact that his precious sister had stepped on her own hair were nothing but a trifling matter. My brother, who had also incidentally been growing out his hair with no less gusto than myself, took hold of my shoulders with a stern look.

"Tsukihi-chan, you should treat the money you lend someone, even your own family, as if you're never getting it back. Money is precious, and you should never give it out if you're not prepared to not get it back."

"Wow, such wise words! Coming from the person I lent money to!" So that means I'm related to some piece of trash.

You could call this a tragedy in two acts.

"Fine, just give me 10000 back, at least. I need it for the beauty salon."

"Hmm, I see. So that means that, on the other hand, if you didn't need to go to the beauty salon, you wouldn't need the 10000 back."

"No it doesn't mean that at all."

"Alright, it's settled."

"Nothing's settled until you settle that debt."

Why are we even related?

And somehow he still has the nerve to lecture his sisters.

"You know, you're starting to remind me of a certain scam artist, borrowing money from girls in middle school and never returning it."

"Ugh..."

It looked like I'd hit a sore spot and a bitter smile stretched across his face.

"Alright, I think I get it now. I'll draft up a loan repayment plan to have the 30000 back to you by the end of the month, so how about we settle for me being your stylist and cutting your hair today, Tsukihi-kun?"

"Why are you acting like I'm the one—"

Whatever.

I couldn't really blame him because I had nothing on myself either, but I'm just the type of person who hates not being able to do the things I decide to do on the day I decide to do them. I'd decided to get a haircut today, so I wanted it done today.

"More importantly, you know how to cut hair?"

"I didn't think you'd underestimate me like this. Do you even know who cut off Hanekawa's braids?"

And now I wish I could have lived my life not knowing.

But I guess it could be interesting to see how it turns out since he does have experience. And if I don't like it, I'll just charge him an outrageous interest rate far beyond legal limits, then demand that he pay immediately.

"OK then, show me what you've got."

"No problem, I was just thinking that I needed to practice in case I ever have another chance to cut Hanekawa's hair."

He just told me I was practice out loud.

And I'm not sure he should be practicing for something like that...

"So, I'm going to need you to take all your clothes from your waist up off and sit down on this chair."

He said, strapping a scissor holster around his waist the moment we arrived at his room. What? Take all my clothes off? Why did he need me to take my clothes off if he wasn't going to make me change into something else?

"What are you saying, you moron. What's baring your upper body in comparison to how the hair stylist bares every facet of his personal life chatting with his customers?"

"Ooh! I see! It all makes sense now! You're smarter than you look! Is that what you were expecting me to say?"

You'd better come up with a better explanation if you want your sister to take all her clothes off from the waist up.

"The little bits of hair will fall into your kimono and make you all itchy. I couldn't bear to watch your delicate skin being prickled like that. Any brother would want to protect his little sister."

"Don't you have a barber cape or something?"

Don't tell me the guy who had more than ten different kinds of scissors in his scissor holster, and kept his long bangs in place with a clip like he was some ultra-chic stylist, didn't even have a barber cape.

I'm not sure I should even call him a stylist, more like a crazier Edward Scissorhands on the loose.

I always wore kimonos around the house, so it was difficult to only take the top off. Looking in the mirror, I saw a psychopath holding a pair of thinning shears and a middle school student wearing a kimono with the top half pulled open. What sort of brave new world was this supposed to be? It's not like the series is allowed to go anywhere it likes just because it's finished.

"Assistant!"

As the perverted sham hair stylist snapped his fingers, a little girl in a white lab coat appeared from somewhere. A little girl, about 6 years old. I could see that she was blond from the few stray hairs peeking out from behind the mask and cap she wore, but they otherwise made it impossible to tell who she was at all. But really, I don't care how cute you think the mask makes you look, why is a hair stylist's assistant wearing a mask and a cap?

That had me confused before I started wondering who she even was.

"Don't worry. This is my assistant I hired in exchange for three golden chocolate donuts."

"I should be worried about her shockingly low wage which, depending on the circumstances, could be less than 300 yen, but could

you explain to me first why your assistant is dressed like a dentist's assistant?"

"That's because I didn't really know what a hair stylist's assistant looks like, so I just had her use an old costume."

"You don't even know that? Go figure it out!"

"You can't expect me to go into a hair salon! The people in there are all so stylish, it's scary!"

Here I was, about to let a sham hair stylist, one who had never been inside an actual hair salon because he was afraid of how stylish the people inside were, cut my hair. I suppose this is why people call me rash.

"Well they say barbers also used to work as surgeons, so it makes perfect sense for my assistant to be wearing a surgeon's outfit."

"I have no idea how you think that makes 'perfect sense' at all, there's only so far you can stretch the truth, you know."

The little girl, no, the assistant, silently pushed a cart in.

I couldn't see very well because of the angle, but looking in the mirror, there was a plastic tray on the cart, and on that tray were all sorts of brushes and hair dryers. They were the sort you might expect to find in a genuine beauty salon; all the tools needed for a haircut assembled in a single set.

"Not that I've learned how to use them and their names..."

"Ahem, could you stop making your customers worry any more than they have to?"

Not that I wouldn't be worried if he hadn't said that.

In any case I was already as worried as I possibly could be about my brother's hair cutting skills, but as for his assistant, she seemed to have dyed her own hair blond (probably) and was quickly and efficiently going through all the necessary preparations. She went about setting up various pieces of equipment around the chair, including a shampoo unit which even had its own backwash basin, as well as the far infrared light beam hair curling apparatus, with the fluency of a seasoned veteran. I

wondered where exactly in my house this entire beauty set had been hidden. It was almost as if it were hidden inside of someone's shadow.

"So, learning from my past mistakes, the shampoo unit's all set up here so if you feel like throwing up, you know where to go."

"Why would I feel like throwing up during a haircut...?"

The assistant placed a few magazines on my lap as I began trembling. Maybe she was just a thoughtful person, but it almost seemed like she felt sorry for me. Like she was doing all she could for me.

I didn't really get what was going on, but I knew something was bound to be off if this little girl was feeling sorry for me.

"Don't worry, Tsukihi-chan. I really have no sense at all for what a hair stylist is supposed to do, but I know I won't have any of that pesky common sense standing between me and the way I treat my customers."

"Don't you think you should?"

"Now, allow me to shave you."

Said my brother, ever the avant-garde intellectual, as he began to lather some shaving cream in a bowl.

"Hehehe, did you know that legally, only actual barbers' shops and not beauty salons are allowed to give a customer a shave with shaving cream?"

"Haa! I can't believe you'd actually try to throw out some random trivia everyone knows like you're a genius!"

"I'll make sure you don't have a single bit of fuzz left on your silkysmooth face!"

"Wouldn't you just call that 'hair' normally?"

Don't talk about a person's face like a fruit.

He might seem like an idiot from the things he said, but the way he lathered the cream really was something. It looked like he could beat a cup of matcha better than me from the way he was frothing up the soapy water, and I was in the tea club.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Matcha (抹茶, *matcha*) is finely ground powder of specially grown and processed green tea leaves, and is used in traditional Japanese tea ceremonies.

I knew what a face shaving was, but they didn't do it at beauty salons, so I was somewhat interested.

"You know, the way you lather the cream makes a difference in how good the shave feels. So as a professional, I feel a duty to make sure this cream is thoroughly beat and fluffy. The bubbles should foam up until they're at least as full as your breasts."

He said as he checked the curvature of the bubbles against my bare breasts with a practiced dexterity.

Wait, that means only people with little sisters can be barbers!

"Come on, you're touching your sister's boobs too much!"

"I feel like you've been saying more than 'I'm platinum mad' recently..."

"Well the only reason for that I can think of would be that you're touching my boobs too much."

"That makes me sound like a baby who can't quite wean."

"Just let go already, or do I have to put you on a weaning diet?"

You better get those hands and their practiced dexterity off already.

How can you even call yourself a professional?

"I'll put mustard all over my boobs."

"I think that'd end worse for you than me... Just to be sure, you don't have anything on your face right, like makeup?"

"Nope, and on top of that I don't have anything on my upper body either."

"Alright, we're good."

"What's good? There's nothing good about your little sister being naked from the waist up."

"Here we go."

Anyway, my brother tied my hair up with a hairband then began applying the shaving cream to my bare face. Ooh, this feels sort of warm but really nice! I looked into the mirror to see myself appearing more like I had grown a luscious beard like Santa Claus, instead of having been shaved.

Ho! Ho! Ho!

"Your face looks like a death mask when it's all white."
""

Us two siblings didn't always see things the same way, evidently.

"Now, I'll take this safety razor and... Haa, haa, haa, haa, haa—"

The hand holding the safety razor began to tremble, making it seem not very safe at all. Hey, wait a second, you're not going to point a sharp object at me with your hand shaking like that, are you?

"Worry not, sister. I'm just trembling with excitement."

"As your sister, that makes me even more worried."

"I can barely keep my heart from beating out of my chest with excitement when I think of how I'm just seconds away from putting this blade against my little sister's delicate skin."

"You better keep your heart right where it is. For the rest of your life."

"It'll be fine, I've wielded a katana a hundred times longer than this razor in battle."

"Every word I hear from you just makes me more worried."

"Here I come!"

I'd rather he didn't come at me at all, but he did, wielding the blade with a surprising, almost timid, tenderness.

So this would be my first time being shaved.

My whole body felt immersed in a floating sensation, like I was lying on a bed of bubbles, along with a physical sense of unease at having my skin caressed by a razor-sharp blade, and a nagging apprehension at the thought of the delicate part of my body that was my face being at the complete mercy of another person.

"Haa, haa, haa, haa, haa..."

My brother's breathing grew more and more intense as he watched me, unable to move a muscle and trying to take the shallowest breaths I could. You know what, I'll let you touch my boobs, but please don't let this be the experience that awakens something even weirder in you, alright?

I don't think I was nearly skilled enough of a narrator to convey this series of strange events, let alone my brother.

The experience of being shaved was "thrilling" in so many different meanings, but in the end, possibly due to my brother's powers of selfcontrol, I emerged unscathed.

"Well you never had much hair in the first place, missed a spot, you still have some shaving cream on your forehead."

He said, as he bent down close to my face, licking the cream off of the spot on my forehead close to my hairline. He seemed as excited as he would be licking the frosting from a cake off my face, except for the fact that the "cream" he had been licking was soap bubbles.

"Bleh!"

He fell onto the shampoo unit.

Are you going to throw up?!

"Cough, cough... Whew, I thought I was going to die for a second."

"What kind of barber thinks they're going to die during a haircut? Get it together, would you?"

"I was holding the razor in one hand and the shaving cream container in the other, what was I supposed to do?"

"I guess."

"How about this, Tsukihi-chan, cough, cough, do you want me to shave the back of your neck too?"

"The coughing doesn't exactly make that sound very appealing. I don't think I'm brave enough to have a blade on the back of my neck, though."

"Well that's frustrating. I'll just have to wait for the next time."

I prayed from the bottom of my heart that this would be the first and last time.

I just hope Hanekawa-san firmly shuts him down... Although we'll have no idea who his next victim will be, then.

"Now then, Tsukihi-chan, let's get started on what we're really here for. It's time to cut that hair nice and short."

My brother put the razor down on the cart, then unsheathed a pair of scissors and a comb from his scissor belt in one nimble motion.

"So, how do you want it?"

He was going all the way with playing the part.

But unfortunately, no matter how hard he tried, all he looked like was a bad attempt at being a psychotic hair stylist. It wasn't even a question of his acting ability, his long and unkempt hair made anything he tried to say completely unconvincing.

"Hmm, how do I want it?"

I thought that cutting it short like Nadeko-chan might be nice, but since I'd already grown it out this long, I may as well swing by a different style on the way there. There was also the fact that if my brother messed up while cutting my hair that short, it would be beyond saving.

Alright, how about a lob then?

"A lob? What's that? Something like twintails? I'm pretty particular when it comes to twintails."

It seemed like our sham hair stylist had mistaken "lob" as a short form of "lobster".

He wasn't being "particular", just particularly annoying right now.

"It's halfway between leaving it long and a bob, so you know, put it together and you get a lob."

"Ah, I see."

Said my brother without a hint of shame, as he put another completely unnecessary hairclip in his hair almost flauntingly, likely to hide his embarrassment at the sad misunderstanding he had no excuse for.

"My apologies. I'm not very familiar with all this hair stuff, I don't even know the difference between conditioner, shampoo and hair treatment."

""

I was finding it hard to continue watching his "I'm not really interested in all that fashion stuff, I'll have you know" shtick any more.

And by the way, those are barely different things anymore, so you're not too far off the mark.

"So, give me a lob, and a light, fluffy perm after. Seems like you have all those expensive tools for it."

"It's a misunderstanding! I mean, understood. 'It's a misunderstanding!' has been my go-to line this past year because of all the times I've had to use it, so it's the first thing that comes out of my mouth whenever something happens."

"What sort of series have we been in this whole time? We hit eighteen volumes you know?"

Snip, snip snip—went the scissors. I had no idea how or where he managed to get these tools, but all of his tools, like the safety razor he had just been using, were top of the line.

So this sham hair stylist started cutting my hair right away, without even washing it first... Not that I mind, I already washed it, anyway.

Clip, clip.

His scissors went along, cutting a girl's hair with barely a hint of hesitation. This actually left a good impression, resolutely doing his business fearing neither my hair, nor gods.

I honestly get quite annoyed with people asking me why I changed my hairstyle, especially with how often I do change it, and if not that, being thought of not as a woman of affairs, but a woman of many affairs. But as a staunch opponent of the view that a girl's hair is her most important possession in this world, I liked my brother's way of thinking, "it's getting long so it's time to cut it."

I guess that's what it means to have some experience under your belt... Although I never actually knew Hanekawa-san when she still had long hair. And now that I think of it, I remember hearing that my brother's girlfriend, Senjougahara-san, used to have long hair too.

"Hehehe ♪"

My brother was spinning the pair of scissors around and around in the palm of his hand to the rhythm of a song he was humming. It seemed like he was getting into the groove. Looking more carefully in the mirror, I saw that he was spinning the scissors not by the finger hole, but only around the finger brace.

Don't do anything dangerous like that above someone's head!

Putting that aside, the haircut itself went along incredibly smoothly; what wasn't so smooth, however, was the feeling of the bits of my hair that fell onto my bare skin, which was a bit uncomfortable. I can see how stripping down from the waist up avoided the problem of the bits of hair getting all over the inside of my kimono, but it didn't do anything to help the fact that the hair would still get all over my body.

It's like he was looking out for the kimono more than me.

"What? Really? It's itchy?"

"Don't talk to me while you're spinning those scissors around! I'll be more than itchy if you keep doing that!"

"I see. Assistant!"

Said my brother.

And as soon as I turned around, there was his assistant, the little girl, sweeping up my hair with a broom. She may have been dressed like a surgeon's assistant, but there was something unmistakably like a beauty salon assistant who excelled at her job in the fluid grace of her every movement.

She might actually be really good at what she does.

She might actually be quite famous.

It was a complete mystery to me why someone with a reputation like her would be working for my brother, but in any case, she took the tool our resident sham stylist had asked for from the cart and handed it to him, just as requested. It was a convenient little neck duster.

"Brush, brush, brush."

"Kyaa!"

Stop gently caressing my naked upper body with the brush! Stop tickling me! This is just turning into some perverted play!

"Is it? It might be quite a hassle, but how about this? I'll painstakingly pick up each and every single hair from your bare skin with my hands, one by one."

"Kyaa, kyaa! You're grabbing me so tenderly now! It's even more like some play now! The difficulty's going up, it's hard mode now." "All the sweat on your skin is making this so hard... Getting one of my sisters to strip from the waist up might have been a mistake this time."

You'd think that'd be a mistake no matter the situation.

Has it ever worked out for you?

"You sure sweat a lot since you have a good metabolism, Tsukihichan."

"Most of this is nervous sweat, though."

"Hmm? Let me see."

"Could you not try to check the temperature of my sweat? Nervous sweat doesn't necessarily mean it's colder, you know? And could you stop putting your hand under my armpit to feel the difference in temperature between the sweat and my body?"

"Hmm. Well we'll leave removing the little bits of hair clinging to your body for another time..."

My brother looked down at my hair that had fallen to the ground, setting the discussion of what to do with the brother clinging to my body for another time aside, as well.

His assistant was still working as hectically as before, but she could hardly keep up, seeing as the hairs were long enough to reach past my toes.

"It almost feels like a waste to throw out all this luscious and voluminous hair. There must be some way to reuse it."

Maybe there is.

I never had to worry about this when I went to the beauty salon, but someone might wonder if something had happened in our house if they saw this much hair being thrown out in the garbage one day.

"Assistant, put all the hair you collect into a plastic bag and store it for safekeeping. We'll see later whether we can use it as pillow stuffing." "Pillow stuffing?!"

"With this much hair, we might even be able to make a whole futon out of it, not just a pillow. There are futons stuffed with goose down and sheep's wool, so why not human hair? It'll be so soft you won't believe." "I think it'll be so heavy I can't sleep."

"Or how about making another one of these neck dusters using your hair? I'd be cleaning the hair off your body with a human hair duster. Dusting off hair with hair, ladies and gentlemen, I do believe we have created a perpetual motion machine."

The spark of environmentally sustainable brilliance that had struck my brother seemed to have cheered him up, and he continued cleaning up the ends of my hair ever more rhythmically than before. He switched between his numerous types of scissors, cheekily layering my hair into a lob.

But at least at this rate it doesn't seem like I'll need to go get it cut again at a hair salon tomorrow.

"Alright, on to the bangs."

"Sure. They've actually grown out a bit longer than how Nadekochan used to wear them, so they're starting to merge with the sides, so could you just cut it so it has a nice defined front?"

"... Now that you mention it, didn't you slice off a bit of her bangs a while ago?"

"What? Did I?"

"How could you forget about that?"

My brother began to clean up my bangs using a comb and a hairclip, with a look on his face as if he were threatening to slice off a bit of my bangs. I was worried that he might do a straight across princess cut style<sup>80</sup> because that was his personal preference, but it seemed like the style he had chosen would require quite a bit more delicate styling, like the back.

"Hehehe, maybe I'll cut it just long enough that it'll get into your eyes."

"That's as creative as you can get trying to annoy me?"

 $<sup>^{80}</sup>$  A princess cut (姫力ット, *hime katto*) is a hairstyle consisting of straight, usually cheek-length sidelocks and frontal fringe. As the name suggests, the style is thought to have originated, or at least become common, in the Imperial court during the Heian Period of Japanese history.

"Or I could curl your eyelashes so they always poke into your eyes..."

"Don't try something that advanced, please."

"Just kidding, just kidding. I would never do something like that as someone who loves eyeballs."

"I'd prefer if you brushed it off as a joke for a different reason. You can't just joke about these sorts of things."

"Where do you want the parting?"

"Hmm, I guess I'll go with right."

"OK, so about 70-30."

That's fine, but could you not say it like that?

So, continuing along, after he had finished touching up my bangs, his assistant the little girl brought a square mirror around to my back, her little feet tapping the ground with each step. Now I had a 360-degree view of my hair through the large mirror. Woah, it might not be professional quality but this was better than I expected. I was secretly preparing myself for the possibility that I might have to go through the "Hey, you cut this part too short! Could you just cut this part a bit shorter to balance it out?! Oh my gosh you cut it too short again!" routine, but my brother was actually pretty good.

"From the angle I'm at, the two mirrors are forming an infinity mirror and it's like my little sister's boobs are going off into infinity, this is the best."

"Can't you just let me be impressed with you for once?"

"My bad, I shouldn't have said that. I almost lost my precious sister's trust. Why don't we do a scalp massage next to improve your circulation? Let your brother massage your head and your breasts until you're all nice and loose."

"You're getting obsessed with my boobs again."

Your precious sister doesn't have any trust in you left to lose.

"You see, you have to massage the scalp softly with the balls of your fingers, like this."

"Could you not show me your scalp massage technique on my boobs? How long are you going to be obsessed with my boobs for?"

Why are you so obsessed with my boobs in the first place? I thought to myself, commenting on my own comment (although I suppose it was better than an obsession with safety razors), I reminded my brother of one thing, just in case he had forgotten.

"Don't forget the light and fluffy perm. I want it a bit wavy, OK?"

"I knew exactly what you were going to say. I'll put such an amazing perm in your hair, every student at your school's hair will start coiling up into waves the moment they see you at the beginning of your new term."

"I don't want it that curled. That wouldn't even be light or fluffy anymore if it started coiling up."

"Alright, let's see this machine."

My brother rolled the far infrared light beam hair curling apparatus over himself, without the help of his assistant. I could already see where this was going the moment he started with his "stylist" act, but I hoped that I was just mistaken.

I had managed to avoid the expected outcome of a sloppy haircut, there was no way something like him turning the dial on the far infrared light beam hair curling apparatus the wrong way and setting my hair on fire would happen.

"Oh no! I turned the dial on the far infrared light beam hair curling apparatus the wrong way and set your hair on fire! 'Cause you're one of the Fire Sisters, get it?!"

"You didn't need to tell me the last part!"

Hot! Hot! Hot! Hot!

And this was where the shampoo unit that my brother had brought to serve as nothing more than a vomit bowl, seeing as I didn't need my hair washed, proved to be useful in the most unexpected of ways.

He forcefully shoved my flaming head into the backwash basin and pressed the showerhead right up against my scalp, soaking it in water, then immediately got to work putting out the fire.

"Glug, grgggle, cough, I'm drowning I'm drowning!" "My bad, that was close. I almost drowned my little sister again."

"'Again'?! You did something like this before?!"

"It's OK, it's OK. Everything's alright. Assistant, remove the mirror."

He ordered his assistant, not wasting a second after shutting off the shower. Hey wait, let me see what the perm looks like before you take the mirror away!

He was way too used to covering things up.

"Calm down, Tsukihi-chan. Don't panic, and don't get up. Stay in exactly the same position you're in now. I'm just going to wash your hair to finish off the haircut. It should still be repairable."

"R-Really...?"

Finishing off with a hair wash, I guess he was leaning towards the barber shop treatment more than the beauty salon course. It seemed more and more like he was actually clueless about hair salons and not just acting that way. No surprise considering that the shampoo unit was set up to use with the face down instead of the face up...

"Are you sure it's going to be OK? I don't want to see you carrying a 300 trillion-yen debt."

"Well I'm sure you could do something about that debt if you wanted to... And isn't that way too much interest for a 30000-yen loan? I don't think you could rack up that much even with compound interest."

"So how are you going to repair it? Do you have some sort of fancy shampoo?"

"You betcha. This stuff will get that burnt hair looking luscious and flowing down to the cuticles. However, as you can see, I burnt both of my hands when I was trying to put out the raging inferno on your head, so because of that—"

He turned away looking despondently, and after looking around as if searching for some other solution that nonetheless eluded him, hung his shoulders weakly.

"I'll have to wash your hair with my mouth."

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"Whew! I managed to get my immortality-infused saliva all over Tsukihi-chan's hair. With that, the damaged hair will be repaired and there's no doubt it'll completely heal, right Shinobu?"

"I think her hair would have gone back to the way it was even without your help..."



"Oh silly you, Araragi-kun. Are you studying history? Isn't that nice. I'm sure your personification of the unsightly beauty of pointless hard work will be recorded for posterity."

No holding back right from the beginning I see. Don't you dare record anything unsightly about me for posterity. But now that I think about it, back when I first met Senjougahara Hitagi she was just like this. And ever since then I've met so many different Senjougahara Hitagis.

"Isn't that nice. Actually, that's wonderful. It's important to look back on the road you've been walking on to see how far you've come every once in a while, Arasuji-san."81

That doesn't mean you should talk about people like the road you've been walking on. My name is Araragi. Don't give me something like

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> 粗筋 (*arasuji*) means the plot or summary of a story that could be thought of like a metaphorical "road".

"sorry, I was taking a nap".82 Get yourself a good night's sleep Hachikuji, I'll wake you up.

"What's the problem Araragi-senpai? Leave that autobiography you've been wanting to write to your loyal slave. There's no one else who can recount the tale of our beginning, how we took each other's hands and found true friendship in each other from the moment we met with as great detail as yours truly."

That wouldn't be an autobiography if you wrote it... And don't write any lies about me, Kanbaru. I remember our "beginning" being quite intense and rather unpleasant. Although we really did find true friendship in each other afterwards. But could you please leave out the part about taking each other's hands.

"Koyomi-oniichan... Koyomi-oniichan. Do you still remember me? It's Nadeko."

Of course... I still remember you. The things I did to Sengoku. The things I didn't do for Sengoku. The path of the snake that she went on. There's no way I can say that I never did any of that. And I can't say sorry anymore either.

"That's exactly right. But you shouldn't just be satisfied with yourself because you learned your lesson, Araragi-kun. You have to think about what could come next and apply it to whatever you face from now on."

That's right. And I'm sure it is coming from you. Coming from someone who could bravely walk towards their future all alone. But Hanekawa, try to remember how it was back then every once in a while.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> 仮眠しました (*kamin shimashita*, "I was taking a nap") sounds very similar to Hachikuji's usual gag 噛みました (*kamimashita*, "I stuttered").

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... Aah, I know. I know. There's no way I would forget you. The wounds that you gave me... and the wounds that I gave you. Actually I'd be in trouble if you forgot about me. Because you were the start of it all, and the end of it all.

And then we'll start again.

We keep coming and going like the seasons. We'll keep walking down our road while things unfold around us and we look to the future. And we'll keep turning the pages on our dazzlingly bright calendar.83

83 Araragi's first name, 暦 (koyomi), means "calendar".



"Unlimited Rulebook"

Ononoki Yotsugi said, as she unleashed whatever that move or more like that brute force attack was called, blowing away half of the monkey oddity that I, the Curse Cat and that little girl vampire were barely holding our own against.

In other words, that Corpse Doll exterminyated the oddity that the vampire and I were having so much trouble with, just like swatting a fly. Ah—I guess just saying that would've been simpler, nyan?

Essentially, the two of us were saved from the brink of death by that emotionless little girl, but I still had a little trouble wrapping my head around it. Maybe it's because I'm just stupid.

No, that's nyot it.

The vampire looked just as out of it as me. I knyew that the two of them weren't on very good terms from the little bit of their conversation I heard (I guess I'm more sensitive to what goes on between people because I'm a cat), but regardless of that, it was written all over the

vampire's face that she nyever thought she'd see the day when she'd be saved by that Corpse Doll.

In actuality.

She... didn't really save us.

"That's right. I was just doing my job."

Ononoki Yotsugi said. That doll, or whatever she was, it was always a mystery to me, said without batting an eye after driving off the monkey oddity, wearing a raincoat, that seemed to be able to control the rain.

I wasn't sure whether the nyame she told us upon arriving was her real nyame or nyot.

"I wasn't planning at all to save you Curse Cat, or you mysterious vampire."

"Who are you calling 'mysterious vampire'. You know who I am. Just the other day, me, you and that girl who's always lost, the three of us teamed up on my lord."

The Corpse Doll seemed completely unconcerned, simply turned her head to the side and said, "Did we actually do that?"

"Well, like Oshino-oniichan always said, 'People can only save themselves'. Though I guess there aren't actually any 'people' here."

"..."

Right.

She could quote that Hawaiian shirt-wearing man all she wanted, but right nyow there was only a Curse Cat oddity, a vampire oddity and a Corpse Doll oddity here. I guess that monkey that ran off was also an oddity, nyan.

"More importantly, like I just explained, mysterious vampire, we should head for that park as soon as possible, that lolicon's waiting for us."

If a lolicon was waiting there, I wouldn't want to go that kind of park nyo matter the reason, but I guess it was a code of some kind.

"Ka ka. Well then, sounds good."

The vampire said with a quiet nyod, then quickly left. I could tell that there was something urgent going on, but how could she drag me out here then leave without even saying thanks, and on top of that leave me here alone with this emotionless girl, nyaa.

"... And we may as well get rid of that monkey too."

That doesn't sound very safe, nyan.

From what the vampire told me during our fight with the monkey, it was an oddity that killed oddities; a specialist of sorts. It could destroy a stray cat, or rather a stray oddity like me, on a whim if it felt like it.

Even if her goal wasn't to save us, that Corpse Doll had driven off the raincoat monkey before it crushed us to pieces, so there's nyo way she would save us from the frying pan just to throw us into to the fire.

Please don't, nyan.

"Curse Cats aren't my area of expertise, so I'll leave things where they are... Good thing I wasn't here with oneechan."

"..."

"Hmm? What's with the face? I said I'll let you go this time, so hurry up and get out of here. You seem like you've got a lot to deal with anyway."

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I mean.

I guess I should be pretty happy that she just let me go. I am a little angry being ignyored like that, but I really do have a lot to deal with nyow.

Nyeither of us have time to deal with each other.

But there was still one thing that I wanted to ask this rather professionyal oddity before leaving.

Maybe it'd be better to ask "Oshino-oniichan" or "oneechan" but I ended up asking this familiar (a shikigami I think).

"... You don't really seem stressed out do you."
"Hmm?"

"It seems like you never get stressed out or lost or conflicted about anything. That must be nice. Do you just decide to do everything and nyever regret any of it?"

I got that kind of impression watching her blow away half of the monkey oddity. Nyot trying to save us, but with nyo hate towards the monkey oddity either.

It seemed like she was just doing it because she decided to.

With a professionyal sense and businyess ethics.

Just like a proud professionyal straightening their tie before a long day in the office.

Saying "It's just business".

I felt jealous of how she could cut off all of her emotions and just act. Actually.

I guess it's nyot quite the same as being "jealous".

Actually it's completely different.

Like hell I'm feeling jealous.

I am those emotions, that stress.

I'm her innyocence.

Like a beautiful white kimonyo, her stress.

"Actually, I guess I've never regretted anything before."

The Corpse Doll replied right away.

But to me it just sounded like she was following the instruction manyual, reading out of a manyual of all the answers to the questions she imagined she'd be asked.

"In reality, it's probably the same whether I've regretted anything before or not. Emotions are just another tool to me. But I guess that's the same for humans too."

"... Hmm? What do you mean?"

"By feeling stress that they aren't really feeling or don't have to feel, humans play and the like, don't they? To me they're like tools of my trade, and to humans they're like tools to play with, but in the end emotions are just tools."

"... What's this. Are you saying that humans need stress in order to mature? Or that humans feel like they can keep going because of some random stress?"

"Both yes and no. People always say 'Other people's sadness is sweet like honey'. But really, a person's own sadness is also sweet like honey."

Just like how when honey is too thick you get heartburn.

The Corpse Doll continued just like she was reading words off a page. Being nyeither "other people" or "a person" herself, only just as a corpse.

"So," she reluctantly continyued.

"I feel sorry for your master from the bottom of my heart. She's had all the fun we call 'stress' stolen from her by you. Though, you could call my sympathy more playing too."

"... Hmm."

That's a pro for you. She knyew exactly what I wanted to say. She saw through the question I was going to ask before I even really understood what it meant.

I guess so.

You could say that my master feels quite guilty about pushing all of her stress off onto me—an oddity that she created herself. But I don't think that my position is anything to be sad about at all.

We're nyot pitiful.

In fact "The people you should pity are", I said as I looked up at the Corpse Doll.

But she had already disappeared.

Without a word of farewell, she had headed off to continuue her job.

It just showed with a sort of boredom, completely different from the way that Hawaiian shirt guy hated goodbyes, just how little stress I presented to her, even as a manifestation of stress itself.

She was an oddity that even a Curse Cat couldn't curse. I wasn't even a threat to her.

That Corpse Doll.

If humans are just supposed to play and being stressed out is playing, I guess it makes sense that nyot feeling any stress at all is the same as being dead.

Meaning that, you could say my master has come back to life nyow that she's begun to feel my presence.

The vampire to her "lord".

The Corpse Doll to her "oneechan".

The Curse Cat to her "master".

The three oddities that had fought together for just a moment ended their brief moment—in which they passed by each other—and their brief misunderstanding, and each went their different ways each for their own "bosses".

The vampire for her bond.

The Corpse Doll for her work.

And then, what do I go for, nyan?





## Princess Beauty

HEROINE BOOK 3: OSHINO SHINOBU
19 December 2013

Translation: Mirrored Translations

The following is a true story from six hundred years ago. However, I would prefer you think of it as fiction. Why? It is too old a story to have much measure of authenticity, and it has neither lessons nor morals—I am sure such a story would be better taken as a lie.

Around six hundred years ago, in a country whose name has been lost to time, there was a very beautiful girl. The only daughter of an affluent noble, her portrait adorned the homes of every family in the nation—there were none who did not know of her beauty.

Her smooth blond hair, her large eyes, her small head, her bright red lips, her delicate neck, her gossamer skin, her fingers like slender icefish, and her slender, long legs, flowing down from her thin, high waist.

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Men and women, young and old, regardless of status were all mesmerized. Simply for her beauty, she was honored with a title by His Majesty the Emperor; the whole nation called her "Princess Beauty", and loved her. The rumors spread, and the citizens formed a great line before her castle, trying to catch a glimpse of her. And so, the rare charm of Princess Beauty far exceeding their expectations, they brought her gifts. Day after day, the mountain of presents before the castle grew larger.

The musician said, "I have made Your Highness' beauty into a song. Please accept it," and played his violin.

The poet said, "I have made Your Highness' beauty into a poem. Please accept it," and his voice resounded in recitation.

The artist said, "I have made Your Highness' beauty into a sculpture. Please accept it," and carved a hundred statues.

But none of their gifts made the princess smile. In deep melancholy she gazed at the mountain of presents, and yet, the way that sorrow tinged her face was so beautiful that nobody noticed she was not smiling.

"Nobody will look at me," the princess lamented, alone in her room. "They extol me as beautiful, beautiful, but they say nothing more. They know nothing of what kind of person I am. They do not know how I am on the inside."

That was Princess Beauty's distress.

Everyone, certainly, was charmed by her beauty. They praised her. Above all else, they looked at her. However, they simply looked at her outward appearance, and no matter what she did or what she said, they paid no attention to her behavior or her actions.

Nobody knew how she was on the inside; nor did they try to learn.

Whatever she did, whatever she said, they thought of nothing but the phrase "Princess Beauty". Whether she succeeded or failed, whether she did right or wrong, their evaluation was always the same. Whatever she

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did was beautiful. Beautiful asleep and beautiful awake. "Princess Beauty" was the perfect name for her.

Is such beauty as that not rather devilish in nature?

"It hardly seems to matter whether or not I have a will of my own. But I am not a slave to my appearance. This beauty with which I so happened to be born has proved nothing but a nuisance. I want them to see how I am on the inside, not just on the outside."

To not rely on her own beauty.

An old witch who had lived in the country since ancient times was moved by her magnificent strength of will.

She stole into the castle at night, originally simply curious about the rumors she had heard; however, she decided to grant the princess' wish.

"Princess Beauty. I will render your beauty transparent, such that nobody will be able to see it. Instead, I will make it so everyone around you can see your inner heart. From now on, it will be a matter of how you are on the inside."

The old witch chanted a spell and waved her wand, the princess' gossamer skin became truly transparent.

"Thank you. Thank you."

"Princess Beauty" was grateful from the bottom of her heart.

A heart now in plain sight of all.

Her exterior beauty cleared away, the princess' exposed heart was unparalleled in its beauty. Her true nature, which until then was concealed by her resplendent appearance, had been made visible by the old witch—even while she remained inside the castle, its radiance spread through all the corners of the nation.

Ashamed of never being able to see the utter beauty of his daughter's heart, the moment after saying his morning greetings, the princess'

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father jumped off the balcony to punish himself. Proud of giving birth to a daughter of such magnificent disposition, as if in so doing she had completed the role for which she had been born into the world, the princess' mother peacefully passed away after eating breakfast.

The musician, believing Princess Beauty's kindness to be altogether inexpressible through song, instead offered her his most precious belonging, more precious than his life—cutting off the hands he used to play his instruments, he offered them to the princess as a suitable gift. The poet, believing Princess Beauty's wisdom to be altogether inexpressible through poetry, instead offered her his most precious belonging, more precious than his life—tearing out the tongue he used to recite his poems, he offered it to the princess as a suitable gift. The artist, believing Princess Beauty's bravery to be altogether inexpressible through sculpture, instead offered her his most precious belonging, more precious than his life—gouging out the eyes he used to inspect his materials, he offered them to the princess as a suitable gift.

All the nation's citizens burned the portraits of the princess which, until then, they had treasured. They wondered why they had been so dedicated to such a pointless decoration. More importantly, they thought, look at the purity of "Princess Beauty". Look at her righteousness. Who could have imagined such a meritorious heart existed in the world? Is that not true beauty?

But not everyone owned things more precious than their lives. So, reluctantly, begrudgingly, thinking that such trifles could never be suitable for the princess, they offered her their lives. They offered up their own lives, their relatives' lives, their children's lives, their grandchildren's lives. The mountain of gifts before the castle became a mountain of corpses, and it did not take much time for it to grow taller than the castle walls.



"Ah! Such tragedy! To think it would come to this!"

Despairing at the mountain of bodies and river of blood that had been sacrificed for her sake, the princess went to the old witch to try to lift the magic spell. But it was too late: the old witch was the very first to behold the princess' inner beauty, and had long since offered up what was more precious to her than her life—the head in which she had cultivated many long years' worth of knowledge. The princess broke down crying before the old witch's severed head.

That pitiable form, that beautiful heart which sheds tears for others, bewitched the nation more and more. They scrambled and competed to offer the princess their lives, or what was more precious than their lives. To console the princess, they threw their lives away one after another, smiling all the while. They seemed so very happy to be able to behold her beautiful heart without being deceived by her appearance, and to die for her sake.

The ill repute of the growing mountain of corpses—or rather, the castle of corpses—naturally became well-known in the imperial capital and neighboring countries; however, whenever the latest armies would come rushing in, they would succumb to Princess Beauty's power. Their preconceptions and prejudices swept away, their hearts washed clean, happily and of their own desire, they became part of the mountain of corpses.

"Enough. Everyone is dying. Everyone is dying for me. I cannot save any of them. The more I do, the more I speak, people die. I wish only to die."

But she was unable to die. The strength of her heart would not permit it. She could not even go mad.

"In that case, go on a journey."



The old witch's severed head spoke. The tears the princess had spilled caused a miracle. For just one moment, the old woman had come back to life.

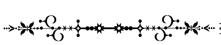
"Someday, you may be able to help those who die the sake of your accursed beauty. Until then, distance yourself from people. Live alone, and do not grow close with anyone. You mustn't stay in one place for too long. If you do, people will soon come to sacrifice their lives to you."

With that, the old woman breathed her last once again.

Thus, "Princess Beauty" departed the castle that had been stained bright red with the color of blood and the great mountain of corpses beside it, and set off on an unending journey. In order to prevent any more people from dying, she followed the old witch's curse-like advice. It was a lonesome flight, one in which nobody could accompany her. It was some time after this that she became a vampire, but these were the circumstances in which the princess—Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade's bloodstained, vampiric legend began.

And six hundred years later, for the first time, she was able to save one tiny life that had been sacrificed to her pure heart.







At nearly the same time that my servant went off to fetch the braided rations,<sup>84</sup> as calmly as if they had only just missed each other, and as suddenly as slipping through a gap, Guillotine Cutter made his appearance.

"What is this? Were thou not to wait for us?"

"I was astonished—astonished with the foolish exchanges of a demon and a human."

So he said, and then as if thinking better, "though both were demons", and shrugged his shoulders.

Apparently he really was astonished.

"I suppose even the boy's barrier is not something capable of containing me at my full power, ka ka. Of course that is only natural. So

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> 三つ編みの携帯食 (*mittsu ami no keitai shoku*, "braided portable meal") is how Kiss-Shot calls Hanekawa at the time of Kizumonogatari.

then, what hast thou come to do? Or, hast thou come to die?85 Thou hast suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of my servant and were utterly routed, were thou not?"

"I dare say as far as God is concerned, I was defeated; as far as humans are concerned, I have not lost. Not to you. And not to you. Or perhaps not to you. And while I'm at it, not to you."86

Guillotine Cutter quickly drew close to me.

I like his fearlessness.

"Of course... Not to that child either."

"... Dost thou intend revenge? Stop, stop, after all, 'tis but a game. That's right. It is as thou hast said, it is not appropriate to decide victory in this matter with such games."

If I presume to say, Guillotine Cutter did lose to the boy.

I suppose Dramaturgy, Episode, and Guillotine Cutter were taken in by the boy's arrangements... Hmm.

Though I'm not one to talk about other people's affairs. "People's" affairs.

"I'm not after something like revenge. It's mere extermination. I'll be properly curing you; you monsters which will not even follow the simple rules of this mere game."

Rules? ... Ah, I see.

This man, he is not astonished, he is truly angry.

Human emotions are difficult to understand.

"Wait just a bit longer, Guillotine Cutter. After that, in accordance with this game's rules, I shall return my servant to humanity. In doing so, two demons will cease to exist at once; one shall die and one shall become human. Surely that will please thee? Will that not accomplish thine important mission? See reason and withdraw."

<sup>85</sup> She says 何をしに来た (*nani wo shi ni kita*) followed by 何を死にに来た (*nani wo shini ni kita*), it's a pun in Japanese but doesn't really translate as one.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> In order, he used あなた (anata, "you"), お前 (omae, "you"), きみ (kimi, "you") and 貴様 (kisama, "you").

This vampire hunter should have entered into that sort of agreement with the specialist. Otherwise, this would-be man of God Guillotine Cutter has no reason to acknowledge defeat. He will not withdraw from the battlefield.

"I won't patiently wait, because nothing like that will be happening. You won't be returning that child to humanity like that, such a thing isn't possible."

"Huh?"

I was reflexively annoyed with that scolding tone, but, no, what was it he just said? I don't really understand, although I get the feeling I've just been insulted. Though, on the other hand, perhaps I've been praised? I had those sorts of suspicions.

Surely—exchanges between a demon and a human.

If he's saying that he has the impression it was the exchanges between a demon and a demon...

"Art thou saying that I cannot be killed by him? Dost thou believe that, as my servant's master, I do not possess that level of ability?"

"No. You could surely be killed by anyone—by Dramaturgy-san, by Episode-san, and by me as well. After all, you are someone who wishes to die, ohime-sama."

" "

"I am, that is to say that God is, saying<sup>87</sup> that that child cannot kill you. How is it that you say that this child who could not even kill me will be able to kill you?"

That—was certainly a problem.

To kill the master who drank his blood—the sole method for a demon to regain his humanity.

Betrayal, rebellion, revolution, insurrection.

Regardless of what is said, what could be done to enable that foolish servant to do such a thing?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> He uses the verb 宣う (*notamau*, "saying"), which is more like "saying with hints of sarcasm or smugness".

Is he capable of dominicide?

Because next time, I will be telling the person who saved me when I was near death to kill me.

I tried to buy time in order to think up some way to ask during our last conversation, but if this is only an aggravation to the vampire hunters then this has become an extremely complicated situation.

"Leave."

At any rate, I told Guillotine Cutter to leave. It was rather generous of me.

"As thou hast surmised, I am in a good mood at the moment. Just this once—no, for just this moment, I shall overlook this. Thou hast shown the strength to snatch away mine arms when I had lost my heart, and so I shall do so in respect of thy skills<sup>88</sup>—I do not care to do it for the sake of the world. Nor do I do it for the sake of humans or out of respect for God. Allow the Oddity Killer to continue on like this. Leave this vampire who would destroy herself to her fate."

"Destroy yourself? What you describe is not the same as suicide. If you intend to die, please do so alone. Do not bring that child into this."

The man who tried childishly winning the game without choosing a strategy puts it well.

How sly.

That way of doing things, so that "no one gets hurt", is a fine talent for a pro. Even a child could understand that logic.

"Somehow or other, the moment has passed. Dost thou wish to die alone?"

"There's a good way to go about this."

Ignoring my kind advice, Guillotine Cutter once again drew near.

<sup>88</sup> She uses 手腕 (shuwan) here for her arms and for his skills; it means "ability" or "power", but she's also using it as a pun for Guillotine Cutter having stolen her abilities with her arms. The two kanji that make 手腕 are 手 (te, "hand") and 腕 (ude, "arm") respectively – you stole my power (arms) so I will respect yours.

Though it is a game, having lost to my servant, it is only natural that he should have taken not only mental damage, but physical as well. How resolute.

Knowing no fear—knowing no limits.

That he is the way that he is, I do not like it at all; quite to the contrary—I despise it.

For I who refused to become a god, it is the complete opposite.

A good way?

"It would be best for me to be killed while seeking revenge against you. If that happens, the child will kill you and auspiciously become a human once again. If you do this, I can eliminate two vampires—it's a plan that will make everyone happy."

"Huh? Why would my servant kill me if I kill thee?"

What reason could my servant have to get revenge for his hated enemy?

Hast thou already forgotten what thou hast done to him?

"I won't choose the method. As far as I'm concerned, even my life is just another means. My life is the easiest tool to use; it is a blade with which to pierce a demon."

"Is that so? To the very end, thou art a man that I do not understand."

"You don't need to understand because that child surely will."

"I understand thee less and less. Thou art a man I do not understand, a man I cannot understand. But, hmm, competing for all these years with a man I doubly cannot understand has been—"

I nearly said fun. That was too close.

I withdrew the demon sword "Kokorowatari" from within my body. It is a sword that can kill only demons, but he is practically like an oddity himself.

We shall test the blade that pierces demons against the sword which kills them, literally.

"Now, I shall go, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade. The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire—the Oddity Killer. Allow me to show my earnestness. Don't hold anything back!"

"Let us make it a feast, Guillotine Cutter! Vampire hunter! Rejoice, for I too shall show thee my earnestness as thou hast gone so far to claim thy prize! I shall fly in the sky. I shall sink within shadows. I shall become mist. I shall make myself disappear and I shall alter my form. I shall use my insight. I shall materialize that which I need—eat a full course! I shall hold none of this immortal body back!"

"Bon appétit!"

"Bon appétit!"

..... I do not intend to relate what happened afterwards.

I was victorious and he did not yield.

I was cut and he was broken.

I ate and he was not able to.

Until the very end, Guillotine Cutter was a man who I did not understand, and he fought back until the moment he died—as a human.



"Ah, that's good."

"What is?"

As I let out a sigh of relief that I felt from the bottom of my heart, Oshino-san asked,

"Having seen 'that', can you really feel that way? Having seen that this sort of horrifying and terrible things exist in the world, can you really say that you have no doubts? If that's the case it's—unusual."

" "

It's not as if I didn't understand what he was saying.

Terrible things. The spectacle unfolding before us was terrible—Araragi-kun has bitten the neck of Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

The human is eating the demon. The demon is eating the demon. The demon is eating the human.

Positioned in such a way that they appeared to be hugging, you could say that they almost looked as if they were unifying to become one, though in reality neither was the case—without either becoming human, they both simply ceased to be demons.

"But isn't this alright? After all it is the 'bad end' that you suggested."

"I'm at a loss, being told something like that as if it were obvious. It wasn't obvious; it was practical. I simply suggested a plan as a professional. Even so, I'd intended to suggest other plans as well. Of all of them, Araragi-kun picked the most uncertain one. It's a bit difficult for me to understand, frankly, but—as a pro it's very important that you don't complain about your customer's choices."

It wasn't as if I were trying to act tough and bad-mouth him.

Oshino-san probably really is confused by Araragi-kun's decision, and probably by Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade's as well—it is fairly difficult to understand.

I'm not in any position to decide how would be best to handle this situation.

Even if I understood his feelings, I get the feeling that it wouldn't do any good. But if it were me, what would I do?

Not now, but earlier when there was still room to make a different choice.

At the time that I went walking around faintly hoping that I might run into a vampire, if I'd encountered one who'd had all four limbs plucked off, what decision would I have made?

It's not a question that seems like it'd lead to a pleasant conclusion.

Contrary to expectations, I might have promptly overlooked it...

I might've given up saying something like, "Well, it is the providence of nature, so there's nothing that can be done about it" as I tossed away all of the stress that's left a bad aftertaste in my mouth all this time. I won't even consider what might happen if some stray cat were to eat that sort of illegally-dumped waste.

At the very least, the vampire that was near death, screaming and crying, probably couldn't even have been saved by kindness.

"I wonder what will become of Araragi-kun now," Oshino-san said in a cold tone.

"He made the choice not to exterminate a vampire—an enemy of mankind. What will become of Araragi-kun now that he's made that choice. Won't he just end up being abandoned by anyone and everyone? Won't everyone give up on him? Probably no one—will end up helping him ever again."

They won't help him; they'll only lend their power.

People save themselves on their own—it seems that's Oshino-san's motto.

But now, the topic at hand was Araragi-kun's future.

A girl with no weight, a girl who's lost, a girl who earnestly wishes, a girl who's a victim—Araragi-kun won't be able to be saved by any of them.

A girl, a girl, and a girl?

Who am I talking about anyway? Is it some sort of parable? Or a metaphor?

Or maybe it's Araragi-kun's so-called "sort of thing you can see through".  $^{89}$ 

Right. Araragi-kun's future as a person has been interrupted. With a snap.

It seems that everyone will share the misery, and as expected the one who will become most unhappy, without complaint, is Araragi-kun—humanity has probably suffered the most harm and vampires have taken the greatest loss, so why must Araragi-kun suffer the greatest punishment?

Why, even though he's done nothing wrong?

Even though he couldn't have abandoned her.

Even though he couldn't have given up on her.

<sup>89</sup> The word used is 見透かす (*misukasu*) which means "to see through" in a figurative sense, such as a person's thoughts or motives.

Even though he only tried to help her—even though he wasn't able to help her.

"I don't know what will happen to Araragi-kun from here on out, but,"

I said, without a determined nuance.

I said it the same as I always do.

"I'll do something. Somehow."

"..... Something's wrong with you,"

Oshino-san said as he returned his unlit cigarette to his mouth.

Did you know?

I don't know everything, I only know what I know.

And that was something that I still didn't know.

I might have something wrong with me. I might be in love.



# AND THEN

KIZUMONOGATARI MOVIE VISUAL BOOK PART 2

13 January 2017

ART: AKIO WATANABE TRANSLATION: RYOUKUGAN

Dramaturgy came to visit me almost exactly a year after that Spring Break from hell. Dramaturgy—the vampire hunter who hunts his own kind. Strictly speaking, it had been exactly 360 days since the night that I fought with that muscular giant's twin swords on the grounds of Naoetsu High School.

It's been a year, but it isn't spring break, at least not for me, since I've already graduated from that school.

It's a series of events that I've gotten over a bit—though it mostly just leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

"It's surprising to see that you're still alive, boy," he suddenly greeted me.

Although, as I'd already decided that I'd never see him again if I could help it, I was surprised by his sudden visit. Of course, even if it weren't sudden, like if we'd made an appointment to meet again a year ago, having a giant man over two meters tall appear would probably be surprising to anyone.

"Don't take offense, I didn't mean anything by it. It's because you seemed weak. I assumed that even if you managed to defeat the three of us you'd probably commit suicide soon after, the same as Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade's first follower."

"..... You say it as if I really did commit suicide... right away."

I made that sort of bluff.

"So what? Since you aren't dead, how would you feel if I said I came to exterminate you?"

"No way. As a man important to Hanekawa Tsubasa, I don't plan to get involved."

What sort of reasoning is that anyway?

Do you not think you lost our fight a year ago fair and square or something?

On inquiry, it seems that somehow or other this bodybuilder-like specialist had quite a few chances to work together exterminating oddities overseas with Hanekawa during the last year—I knew that she'd been overseas "studying abroad" ever since midway through last semester, but what on Earth has she really been up to all this time?

Seriously, what kind of person is she anyway?

Don't just go on getting along with everyone—though I think that part of Hanekawa probably has to do with why she helped me during spring break last year. Going so far as to wish that the girl who saved me despite my deplorable state wouldn't help out one of my enemies seems a bit, well, selfish...

"It is. 'To help my enemy is not to turn against me.'"

"Who said that?"

"Hanekawa Tsubasa."

"I wonder if that's really something Hanekawa would say..."

"She didn't actually put it that way."

"That makes sense. She doesn't usually use harsh expressions like that."

"She said, 'If mew help myi enemyi, it's not like yourr purr-pose is to turn against mye.' "

"Eh? Black Hanekawa didn't come out, did she?"

The cat that possessed Hanekawa during Golden Week should've already passed on... But I suppose there are probably circumstances that I don't know about.

Eh, oh well. It's tiring to think about it.

Since Dramaturgy isn't squaring up to fight and hasn't turned his hands into twin flamberges, it seems he really hasn't come to exterminate me. Unlike Guillotine Cutter, this specialist isn't the type to use that sort of deception.

"Oh, I gave up on exterminating you. What I haven't given up on is scouting you. Do you have any interest in becoming a pro specialist?"

..... Wow, he actually asked me.

He asked me whether I'd become a vampire-killing vampire during Spring Break as well.

Killing your own kind seems a bit unprincipled to me, but I suppose it's the right attitude for a pro specialist to take.

"Gaen Izuko is probably in the same situation as well, but my organization is facing a shortage of manpower. In this world of scientific understanding, even if the number of oddities doesn't decrease, the amount of oddity exterminations will. You'll be a perfect fit for the job if it keeps going that way. At any rate, the way you are now, you'll have a hard time finding honest work."

It had been difficult to tell where to up to this point, but at some point Dramaturgy's gaze shifted so that it seemed that he was looking (down), rather consistently, at my shadow.

A shadow that belongs to a vampire—and a shadow that a human wouldn't have.

"You're not at an age where you'd believe something like 'If you believe in them, your dreams are sure to be realized'. Putting it correctly, it should be 'If you can't believe in your dreams then they will never be realized'—and you, having experienced that Spring Break and the year that's elapsed since then, seem not to be able to believe in your own future."

"I'll pass."

His invitation was like a bad joke, but I suppose he isn't exactly the wittiest guy.

Consequently, as I was being scouted a second time, I refused the offer once again.

"Even if I were to become a specialist, as I am now I wouldn't even be a vampire who kills his own kind. Even if you say that I'm of the same line as the former Oddity Killer, I won't take on that name myself. Otherwise, I could end up making enemies of humans and oddities alike."

"Heh, you're afraid of that? You really are sensitive. 'If mew help myi enemyi, it's not like yourr purr-pose is to turn against mye'—and all."

Don't quote Hanekawa's words.

It really takes away from this serious atmosphere when you meow while talking...

"Though I am a vampire that kills his own kind, it's not something I've ever been ashamed of. It's not my job to become the enemy of demons or humans, if anything I believe it's to become their ally—helping both demons and humans."

"Is that so? Well, our intentions might be the same. Even so,"

I thought a bit about how to phrase it, but there was no choice but to put it frankly just as I thought it.

"I'm turning down your offer because I still believe in my future."

"You're a man who doesn't mince words even when you should, aren't you, though that might be a negative in terms of finding work." 90

"No, I'm not that fun of a guy."

"Humph."

With that, Dramaturgy turned to leave.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Dramaturgy makes a pun with 就職 (shuushoku, "work") and 修飾 (shuushoku, "modifying, decorating") that doesn't really translate without ruining the flow of the dialogue, so it's been paraphrased here rather than trying to force it in.

At any rate, even though he only turned to leave, because his body was so big it seemed like I, being so much smaller, might be knocked over by the wind pressure—well, that was a bit of an exaggeration.

"I'll be withdrawing for today, I've got a flight to catch. Next I'll be going with Hanekawa Tsubasa to exterminate oddities in Singapore."

Why am I getting the feeling that it's like you've become Hanekawa's partner?

Seriously, what the hell has been happening this last year anyway?

What if Hanekawa ends up developing a fetish for muscular giants because she's been spending so much time with him—come to think of it, didn't she say something like she sold her brain, but did she really mean she sold it to Dramaturgy......?

"While you're believing in your prospects, keep thinking about your future. You're a man who's important to Hanekawa Tsubasa, and you're a man who's beaten me—so I'll give you that courtesy." 91

Then, meowing as a farewell, Dramaturgy went to leave.

Meow isn't a local phrase at all, but anyway, he went to return to work, and to the battlefield.

From the time he arrived until the moment he left, even though I was just standing in the same place, I felt as if I'd been left behind—like I'd been left behind to live a normal, everyday life.

But the one who was actually leaving was probably me.

Ever since that Spring Break I've been running away; even now it's like I'm still running—that's why I couldn't accept Dramaturgy's invitation.

Although, if it's only thinking about it, that should be OK.

If I only consider it people won't die, and demons won't die either.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> The phrase Dramaturgy uses is 三顧の礼 (sanko no rei), which means for someone of a higher societal standing to beg for something from or apologize to a person of a lower standing. He's essentially saying that though he is "better" than Araragi, he'll be "kind enough" to offer him praise for the time being in a sarcastic sense.

At most the wounds would only ache—the fresh and old wounds alike, oozing.

Even I won't be 18 forever, it's high time that I worry about my future. I, who didn't become an adult just because I graduated from high school, turned my eyes towards my shadow, averted them, closed them, and thought.

And then.



## **WHY**

Nisio Isin Matsuri 2016 Special Fanbook 3 March 2017 Kizumonogatari Movie Complete Guidebook 29 November 2017

ART: OH! GREAT TRANSLATION: RYOUKUGAN

Is it alright if I tell one occasionally?

It's a collector of monster stories telling stories about monsters.92

It happened on the first day of spring break... Hmm, although, since it's been so long since I became an adult, I don't really have much of a concept of "spring break" myself, and as someone who's never really worked, the concept of spring break is even more foreign. And so, what I mean is that it was the first day of spring break for a certain high school student in that town that I aimlessly stopped at.

I saw something strange. It's my job to see strange things.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> The word used for "collector" is 蒐集家 (*shuushuuka*). Normally, one would write collector as 収集家 (*shuushuuka*). The version used in the story implies that the collecting is done either out of interest or for research rather than simply gathering things up as the normal writing would imply. Also, the kanji used contains 鬼 (*oni*, "demon") as a radical, making it a bit of a visual pun.

You asked why it was a vampire? Well that's only half-right. Why was it the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire? Well now that's half-justice, isn't it?

What I saw was the image of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire in the form of a young child, dragging the body of a certain high schooler. She was dragging that dead-looking boy like he was a giant turnip or something. Ever since I met Gaen-senpai back when I was a college student, which is to say well before seeing this, I'd had spiritual experiences that had piled up like a sacred mountain, but, well, seeing as strange a sight as that was totally unprecedented.

It was obviously hard work. Well, it was probably more like torture than work.

That certain high schooler had a small build, but even so it was obvious that it was fairly hopeless, as it was beyond the little girl's strength—seemingly unconscious, it looked as though his skin might be grated off as he was being pulled along the surface of the road.

All the same, the girl seemed to have no intention of parting with that certain high schooler. Gripping to him like life itself, as if he were a part of her own body, she continued to stubbornly drag him along.

I more or less understood what happened.

However, I hadn't at all anticipated that it would turn out like this—Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, whose heart I'd pulled out for the sake of fairness, would likely either beat the alliance of vampire extermination experts made up of Dramaturgy, Episode, and Guillotine Cutter or lose to them.

The outcome would either be a future where she lived or one where she died.

But to think that there would be a future where she was shamelessly saved by a mere high schooler while on the verge of death, and then go as far as transforming herself into a child to survive.

Honestly, I can't think that she's a demon who wants to live when she went as far as taking that form—if anything, I think she's a demon that wants to die.

For that reason I removed her heart, and for that reason this situation came about.

Obviously, on principle I can't make any concessions about the fact that I tried to create a balance in the fight between a single vampire and three vampire hunters, but seizing Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade's heart was also in order to balance her between life and death.

The suicidal desire shut up in the right ventricle, the survival instinct sealed within the left ventricle, the death wish confined to the right atrium, and the metabolism lurking in the left atrium, I reset them all to zero in one go.

I'd intended to free her from the hundreds of years' worth of ties that had built up within her chest—naturally, out of kindness. Or out of pity.

If there's anything I pay respect to, it's time. And if there's anywhere I aim my hostility, that would be time as well. This legendary vampire, this historical vampire, I'd wanted her to draw conclusions based on the present—even so, why did it turn out like this?

Why?

There's no reason. There's no way it should have happened.

A dude just passing through removed her heart, but it was a passing high schooler that pierced it.

For the sake of her benefactor, awkwardly and unreasonably, she's shamelessly trying to live—as a result, not knowing how he would feel, seeking distress rather than ease and humiliation over dignity from the benefactor who saved a vampire while not knowing her true nature.

Haha, how foolish. Though I am moved.

I'm not lying, I'm being serious.

I'm not making this up, I'm telling you a true story.

As evidence, I approached the vampire dragging along a certain high schooler—approached her and said.

Not in order to help her, but to keep things moving along.

Not so that she'd keep living, but so that she'd keep dying.

Not in order to exterminate her.

In order to cut off her retreat.

"Are you being chased, Heart-Under-Blade? If you are, I know of a good place to hide."

It'd be nice if, at least once, something nice could happen in her old age for this princess who never lost her heart, even now when she's lost her heart.93

It'd be nice for her to face death without regrets.

<sup>93</sup> For the first instance of "heart", he says \(\in\) (kokoro) which means "heart" in a metaphorical sense (like "from the bottom of my heart", "broke my heart", etc.). The second "heart" is 心臓 (shinzou), the actual organ itself.



A young boy with a white uniform and the left leg of a woman on his shoulders states:

"At first, I wondered how it would turn out, but in the end, with our combined effort, it went surprisingly well."

A giant man holding the right leg of a woman says in response:

"It is not like that. We cornered her, but we let her go. We, as a group, should rather feel ashamed."

The next one to speak was a man with a spiky hairstyle, holding the left and right arms of a woman as if they were shaking their hands.

"As always, I am the harsh one. I would not go as far as to say that I'm modest but I get what you mean. But even then, I prefer to think it was a success."

The half-vampire, Episode.

The vampire that hunts his own kind, Dramaturgy.

The man that considers himself a god, Guillotine Cutter.

That is a conversation between specialists with three different mentalities. The first one fights for his own self-interest, the second one for work and the third one thinks it is his fate. This conversation happens just after the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, flew away.

She managed to escape from the hunters, but as you know, they still snatched away her four limbs. It was already too late to kill her... It was too late.

"Already" is where the opinions diverge.

Episode was optimistic, Dramaturgy was pessimistic.

And Guillotine Cutter was objective.

"You prefer to think it was a success. To be honest, I think that the weakest of us should have been sacrificed. And yet, here we are, the three of us, safe."

"Someone should have been sacrificed? Forgive my question but it is the first time I am hearing that, mister Guillotine Cutter."

"That's something I was prepared to do. When we were fighting Heart-Under-Blade, I did not want to have regrets."

"This is so like you, Dramaturgy. And it is the same with you, Episode... And obviously, I am similar too. Our biggest merit during the fight was that we faced this immortal oddity-killer vampire and that two of us could have died but did not."

Guillotine Cutter calmly analyzed the reality of what happened, but there seemed to be fear in his words. While reviewing the accomplishments of the team, he seemed to be worried.

"What are you saying, mister? No one died during the fight, right? Are you not pleased with that? Are you saying that Heart-Under-Blade went easy on us?"

"I wouldn't say that she went easy on us, but during the fight, she seemed distracted. Like there was something wrong with her body."

"Something wrong? Like she lost her heart?"

Dramaturgy was obviously joking but Guillotine Cutter, instead of refuting the argument, said that it was "a possibility".

"I don't understand. If it's true that Heart-Under-Blade was distracted like you said, then it's a good thing for us, right? If we kept

chasing after her, then we could have easily finished her. We could have killed her without risking anything."

"I don't get what you are saying, Episode. Even if there was something wrong with her body, she could have easily dodged our surprise attack. And, if she found out that something was wrong when she was escaping, the situation would have been drastically different."

"We tore off each one of her limbs. If something was indeed wrong with Heart-Under-Blade, then surely, we couldn't have defeated her, right?"

Dramaturgy was more cautious on Guillotine Cutter's argument but Episode's fighting spirit was the same as usual.

"It's so stupid." said the half-vampire, in response to Guillotine Cutter's argument.

"There was something 'empty' about her. An emptiness that can't be filled, that has no sense. Something she could not find. Something like a sheath that perfectly fits its sword."

"It's not something, it's probably someone."

Still standing, Guillotine Cutter continued, expressing a similar opinion:

"It's just that we were very careful in our preparation. Yes, very careful... Let us not be distracted and get prepared for what's next."

"Yes, let's proceed with caution."

Dramaturgy summed up the situation. Then, the three hunters, while holding on their trophies, faded out in the darkness of the night.



































TRANSLATION: NYOREM

"Oshino-san probably already said something like that, but crab is delicious mainly because it is difficult to eat, right?"

Senjougahara Hitagi told me that just after having gained back her weight from the oddity known as the Heavy Stone Crab. Well, it is kind of her habit, having this kind of idle talk.

A conversation about crabs or more precisely on crab-free dishes.

"It's easy to understand if you think about it. If nude photos of a beautiful guy who normally wears thick clothes were to suddenly appear, what would you do, Araragi-kun?"

"You're asking me what I would do if I were to see such pictures? I would report them of course. That is my duty as a good citizen."

While I'm at it, even if photos of a fully-clothed guy undressing a high school girl were to appear, I would also report them. Without hesitation.

There is no way I would not.

"And when you shell a crab, put it in a plate and you feel that something is bothering you, isn't that similar?"

"I see what you mean. Considering it's coming from *you*, I should have seen this coming. Do you want me to praise you?"

"You should be careful of what you say."

"Well, as crabs are not something that you commonly find on dining tables, if it was me, I would have chosen another example like the kind of crayfish you find in rivers. It would have been easier to understand."

"You have such sturdy eating habits. You should come to my place and I'll feed you three meals a day."

"Am I dreaming or did you plan all of this from the beginning just to invite me? If we were talking about mobile games and if there was a gacha<sup>94</sup> you can get with a 1% probability. If you were told that you can get it on the first try with any character you want, then where do you think is the difference?"

"It's your example that is different!"

I said "from the beginning" but when "Hitagi Crab" was published, the iPhone was not even announced.

In any case, it must have been amazing.

The time when there were no smartphones.

But I get it. When you buy a lottery ticket, it's like you are "buying your dreams". You justify it by saying that you wasted money to put an end to your unproductive life. But in reality, the true reason might be elsewhere: lottery is interesting only because the probability of winning is low.

It's not that you want to win millions of yen, it's the fact that the odds of winning are one in millions.

It's worth taking the challenge because it's difficult.

You might say that the way bananas are designed makes them easy to eat or that there is no reason for watermelons to have such thick skins

 $<sup>^{94}</sup>$  ガチャ (gacha, "capsule toy") are similar to loot boxes in free-to-play mobile games, which are very popular in Japan.

or to be full of seeds, but even if soft-shell crabs had shells, you would still want to eat them.

I also feel that it's the same kind of question that would have arisen if there was no poison in fugu.<sup>95</sup> If fugu was tetrodotoxin-free, would it still be this rare, four-star fish?

But it's not about the difficulty of the task either. In recent gacha games, you often have moments when you want to say something like "I don't know why but I know that I can get out of this situation!" which seems to be the kind of thing that the protagonist of a shonen manga would say. If you think about it, then it is clear that the situation is far from hopeless. When you say that something is difficult to eat, take into consideration that eating iron is also difficult to eat and that it can even kill you.

"When you find something that looks delicious, even if it is difficult, try not to eat it. When you eat something that is difficult to eat, you are able to truly appreciate its flavor. For me, that is an important precision. Nevertheless, I cannot deny that the tastier something is, the more difficult it is to obtain. That is what people call 'high class food'. It's also strange that you tend to forget the value of the food you are used to. Getting back to Oshino, he is a clumsy guy, so it's kind of normal for him to say things like 'I really hate crabs'."

"Oshino-san is for sure not good at eating so it would have been unexpected that he could have enjoyed a tasty crab. People are rewarded when, after having so many troubles, they finally succeed, that is, in shelling crabs."

Senjougahara answered before continuing.

"If you aren't rewarded after having so much trouble, then you learned nothing. But still, you should not give up so easily. See, you too, Araragi-kun, you became friends with a difficult woman like me. Shouldn't you feel blessed?"

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 $<sup>^{95}</sup>$  フグ (fugu) is a pufferfish that can be lethally poisonous due to the tetrodotoxin contained in its body.

"I want to say that but when you stapled the interior of my mouth, I was sure that I could not forgive you. So now that I have, give me a proper reward."

You are not a difficult woman.

You are just bad at having a normal life.

That is why you also have memories that you should take care of.



"Even though I said 'Let's eat crabs', you won't be quite able to eat all of them in one bite. There exists a huge variety of crabs, you know. The swimming crab, the queen crab, the red frog crab, the Echizen crab, the snow crab, the heikegani, 96 or the Chinese crab. There are even soft-shell crabs, whose softness equals mine. Since you can even eat the inside, you can say that it's the king of crabs but not quite the red king crab." 97

Senjougahara said this with her usual, flat, monotonous tone, so I thought that she wanted me to answer something. Without particularly thinking, I wanted to say something like "But the red king crab is not a crab, isn't it?". And just at this moment.

"Ah?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> 平家蟹 (heikegani, "Heike crab") is a species of crab with a shell that bears a pattern resembling an angry human face. They're locally believed to be the reincarnations of the Heike warriors defeated at the Battle of Dan-no-ura as told in *The Tale of the Heike*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> The red king crab is another species of crab.

She looked at me for a second time. Like she was looking at something dirty.

You can make this kind of facial expression?!

"Soft-shell crabs are not a species but rather a condition, an illness, right?"

I said that, but in reality I wanted to comment on her alleged "softness".

"If they are not crabs, then what are these things?"

The way she said "things" is the same way you speak about an old acquaintance who betrayed you.

"The red king crab is a hermit crab... You really didn't know that?"

"I don't know everything. I just know about crab soups."

"Let's not deviate too much, will you?"

Nevertheless, did she really not know? Damn it, it seems I stepped on a landmine, or more precisely I should say that I fell in a hole created by the lack of knowledge.

But that fact is something relatively known. I wouldn't say that this is part of general knowledge but I thought that it was a pretty famous trivia. The kind of trivia you learn naturally when you waste time on your smartphone.

"Sorry but I'm a normal high schooler. I adhere to the 'I don't touch my smartphone after 9:00 pm' rule. I even use a screen protection."

"Don't adhere to such rules so quickly. This is not the kind of thing you should follow without thinking."

"Even though Araragi-kun, you are always the one saying things like 'Paying bills is not something that is imposed on me in any way. It is an investment in the future.'"

"You're scary."

"As for the name 'red king crab', looking only at its external appearance, I would have said that it doesn't look like a crab. Maybe we need to consider it in a broader sense? You talked about a hermit crab, right? Is it the kind that travels with its house on its back? I would have found it more convincing if it was a cod."

Well, it does indeed not look like a crab. In the same way that there are octopuses with more than eight legs. When naming things, there is no room for mistakes, even though I never named anything. There are also cases when names are really close but mean completely different things, like for "live sharksuckers" and "sharks".

"You mean like the fact that dolphins and whales are of the same species or the fact that the only difference between eagles and falcons is the size. Am I wrong?"

"If you take the meaning of crustaceans to the letter, then yes, it is the same thing. In reality the names we give to living things seem to be random, but we give them names only for our convenience, to differentiate them. When you find a still-unknown species, you pick a temporary name that is not already taken, and then, after some time, you wonder if changing its name is really worth it. I understand your complaint, but in our world, this is how things are done. Rather than being correct, rather than not making mistakes, correcting mistakes is the most difficult thing to do, right?"

"Correct things must be ascertained."98

I was about to take back what I said but, this proud like a devil high school girl just checked my kanji usage. "Checked" or perhaps I should say "verified".99

"By the way, the kanji used to write 'hermit crab' kind of look like the ones used to write 'parasite', right?"100

I was about to take it back, I was about to take it back... I should have done it and reoriented this conversation. It's really difficult to recognize our own mistakes.

 $<sup>^{98}</sup>$  The verb "to correct" (正す, tadasu) is pronounced the same way as "to ascertain" (私す, tadasu).

 $<sup>^{99}</sup>$  The verb "to verify" is also pronounced the same but written differently (質 $\tau$ , tadasu).

<sup>100 &</sup>quot;Hermit crab" is written as 寄居虫 (*yadokari*) while "parasite" is written as 寄生虫 (*kiseichuu*).

Nonetheless, human society is based on a lot of misunderstandings. I misunderstood a classmate, that is Senjougahara Hitagi, I misunderstood a class president, that is Hanekawa Tsubasa, and I even misunderstood a vampire, that is Oshino Shinobu.

And frankly, I also made mistakes on the true nature of oddities. If I had identified more clearly the crab which took away Senjougahara Hitagi's weight, then maybe she would have avoided useless stress causing her to lose some of her memories and to be this skinny.

"Who is this emaciated girl you're talking about?"

"It's not you and no need to use this sharp tongue of yours. As for 'emaciated', does this word really exist?"

"Farewell."101

"What a comeback, something that only you could achieve with such timing."

"Good grief. I made a mistake. The fact that an admirable Cinderellalike person like me made a mistake is unbelievable."

"Well, seeing you as Cinderella is quite difficult for me."

A misunderstanding that is not a misunderstanding. 102

"This is not a mistake" is what I meant to say.

There are still misunderstandings that I have to ignore, even today. I am afraid that after fixing things, chaos will ensue and I know perfectly well that I won't be able to fix things again.

I made mistakes... Sorry.

It is very hard for me to think that.

How comfortable it would be if only I could say it.

"The truth is it's not the time to say goodbye, it's the time to put on airs and be rosy. Rosy not as in the name of the flower but as in its smell.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> "Farewell" (然らば, saraba) and "emaciated" (さらばえる, sarabaeru) start the same way in Japanese.

<sup>102</sup> The first instance of "misunderstanding" is spelled correctly as 勘違う (*kanchigau*). The second one is written 蟹違う (*kanichigau*), with the first character having been replaced with 蟹 (*kani*, "crab").

It's the same with crabs. The red king crab is of course not a crab but tastes like a crab, that's what I understood. By the way, Araragi-kun."

"What do you want, Senjougahara?"

"Horseshoe crabs are crabs, right?"

"You want to eat horseshoe crabs?"

In that case, it is impossible to find such species even in Hokkaido, so we have no option but to leave Japan. By the way, it's true that crabs are not part of the Chelicerata group<sup>103</sup> but if you only look at the kanji, then it is not that obvious.<sup>104</sup> Even when making mistakes, this woman does not give up. I had no choice but to accept my defeat.

"Tsk-tsk. Is this a joke on kabutos?"105

"Don't misread only that part!"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Chelicerata is a subset of the anthropods and contains species such as arachnids or sea spiders.

<sup>104</sup> Chelicerata is written as 鋏角類 (kyoukakurui), with the kanji 鋏 (hasami, "scissors"), 角 (tsuno, "horn") and 類 (rui, "species"). Crabs seem to fit each one of these characteristics.

<sup>105</sup> In the previous sentence, "to accept my defeat" is written as 兜を脱ぐ (kabuto o nuqu. "to take off the kabuto"), where 兜 (kabuto) refers to the traditional helmet worn by samurais. The same kanji is used in the word for "horseshoe crab" (兜蟹, kabutogani).



I hate mirrors. Every time I see one, I want to take a hammer and mercilessly smash it to pieces. Three-sided mirrors, mirrors on compact cases, full-length mirrors, houses of mirrors, endoscopes-my heart strains with my desires to break them. I'd like to disassemble a singlelens camera, smash the optical mirror, and reconstruct it as a mirrorless camera. But the reason I don't act on these desires is not because I don't carry a hammer around (well... I do, in a manner of speaking); it's because if you smash a mirror, all you do is multiply it into so many little mirrors. Just like hatred. A while ago, I actually set about testing how much I could hate a mirror; I used the pieces of a mirror I really did smash up to make a kaleidoscope. Looking into it was just awful. Like the worst kind of hatred. The broken mirrors reflected each other in a timeless, infinite hellscape. That's why, if you want to destroy a mirror, you don't smash it—you tear it off. You need to peel it away from the other side of the glass, scratching it off, scratching, scratching. Scratching, scratching, scratching. If you do that, it will become

beautifully transparent and clear. The other side is the important side, and the other side is what I despise. I hate mirrors. I hate other sides.

However, as a young mathematical genius, it's my duty to prove why I hate mirrors so much, right down to their other sides. Of course, the reason is immediately apparent: it's because mirrors reflect me. Because when I look at one, I see myself. Because my eyes fix on my eyes. When I look inside a kaleidoscope, an infinite number of my own selves look back at me. Staring at my wounds—even in those miraculous moments when I think my reflection looks cute. The more I look, the more my mind is eroded, scratched off from the other side, scratching, scratching, scratching. They say people's reflections look good to themselves, but conversely, that means that from the other side's perspective I look bad. I look like a hideous monster that ought to be eliminated. So I've got to kill my reflection before it kills me. If I don't smash it before I get smashed, it will kill me from inside the mirror. From the other side of the mirror. I'll be shown for what I really am. Proof complete—therefore, I hate mirrors.

Therefore, I hate myself.

Even so, I love myself more than I do Araragi.



"By the way, Kisaragi-san." 106

"How did you just call me? If you continue misreading my name, we will have problems continuing this story. Hachikuji, you should not make mistakes with the names of people you know. If you were to do that in a short story of the special edition of a manga then people would think that you are talking to a completely new character, namely 'Kisaragi-san'. Don't make such a mistake again, please."

"Sorry, I stuttered."

"Don't lie, that was on purpose."

"I stutteted."

"It wasn't on purpose?!"

"It can't be helped, I'm always misreading people's names. What's important is that after making such a mistake, you should ask yourself

<sup>106</sup> Kisaragi (如月) is the traditional Japanese name for February.

how to repair it. Do you want to make me look miserable? You don't, right? Furthermore, Kisaragi-san,<sup>107</sup> you already made mistakes in your life I suppose?"

"Repairing mistakes? You're probably right. And don't change the kanji."

"Kisaragi-san."108

"That's a character from another series.<sup>109</sup> I don't look like him at all. Good grief. At the same time, I feel like it's a miracle for the both of us to still have this kind of exchange after ten years."

"Nay, I've only started to know about you today. So please don't feel anything special because I hate you... Humm? What was it? Minazuki-san?" 110

"Don't start changing the month! And Minazuki? For someone like me who enjoys life to its fullest, this is really incorrect." You're really bad, you're making mistakes on two characters that don't remotely represent my personality. You probably should leave such things to your mother."

"You should not put away the things that annoy you. Are you really enjoying your life? By the way, this is not Mother's Day, so you should probably apologize to your mother for what you said."

"That is impossible too. Unfortunately, I've never apologized to my mother."

<sup>107</sup> Still the traditional name for February, but with another spelling (更衣).

 $<sup>^{108}</sup>$  This time, *Kisaragi* is written as 飢皿木, with the characters 飢 (ki, "hungry"), 皿 (sara, "plate") and 木 (gi, "tree"). The gi character is the same as the one in Araragi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Kisaragi is a character appearing in the *Densetsu Series*, which is another light novel series written by Nisio Isin.

<sup>110</sup> Minazuki (水無月) is the traditional Japanese name for June.

<sup>111</sup> Minazuki is written as 水無月 with the characters 水 (mizu, "water"), 無 (mu, "nothing") and 月 (tsuki, "month"), so it"s literally "the month without water". Here, "enjoys" is written as 潤う (uruou) which also means "to get wet".

"And you're wondering why your popularity rating kept dropping until this short story that comes with the special edition?"

"Well, rest assured! After graduating from high school, I will become a rapper so that I can express my gratitude to my mother by singing."

"Your future plans are not quite reassuring. You're the kind of son that's always stirring up trouble."

"I'll sing Carrying You."112

"But the ending song of Castle in the Sky is not a rap song."

"In reality, I tried apologizing to my mother a lot of times. But if we compare it to the number of times my mother apologized to me, then it's really nothing. I would even say that it's relatively zero."

"What you're saying is the worst. What's this 'nothing'? Your life as a human, Shiwasu-san, 113 is nothing."

"More and more things are falling apart. At least, get the correct number of kanji! And use 'ki' or 'gi' as the last character! I will say the last ones so that we're even: Fumizuki, Shimotsuki, Nagatsuki and anmaki." <sup>114</sup>

"But anmaki is not in the Japanese calendar, it's a specialty of Nagoya, isn't it?"

"Calendar? I see. Since my first name is Koyomi," you took the opportunity to call me with such names."

"I don't care about your first name, idiot! I would rather remember the number pi or count the rocks around here."

"Why are you so violent suddenly? Is it one of your new personalities?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> 君をのせて (*Kimi wo Nosete*, "Carrying You"), by Azumi Inoue, is the ending song of the Ghibli movie *Castle in the Sky*.

<sup>113</sup> Shiwasu (師走) is the traditional Japanese name for December.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Fumizuki (文月), Shimotsuki (霜月) and Nagatsuki (長月) are the traditional Japanese names for July, November and September respectively. However, anmaki (あんまき) is a Japanese sweet made in Nagoya.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Koyomi (暦) means "calendar" in Japanese.

"Rest assured. My name is Hachikuji Mayoi. My parents chose that name, it's important to me. What do you think about that, February-san?"

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"I don't understand, when you say 'February-san', are you referring to me?"

"Oops, I leaked your secret middle name."

"My name is not Araragi February Koyomi! And I'm not the kind of person who has a middle name. If I had one, then I would not hesitate to go to the tribunal asking for a name change. My name was given by my grandfather."

"You must cherish it in this case. Your dying grandfather used his last strength to give you such a name."

"Don't make it look like a tragedy. My grandfather was also the godfather of my two little sisters."

"Their names were... Karen-san and Tsukihi-san, right? Because of their big brother, they may have been disappointed with their *too simple* names. Because they both have 'fire' in their first names." <sup>117</sup>

"That's true but you shouldn't say it. You can but you really shouldn't. It's not like they filed a lawsuit against me but we were indeed on bad terms. I remember them saying things like 'Koyomi, you bastard, your name is more difficult to remember than the number pi and our names are too different, as siblings I mean'."

"Your little sisters became quite like you, Kisaragi-san."

"You can say that, but in the end, they seem quite pleased with how it turned out. They even call themselves the 'Fire Sisters'."

"I see, then your grandfather must have some regrets I presume. Because he gave you such a strange name, his grandchildren became strange kids."

<sup>117</sup> The *ka* in "Karen" (火憐) and the *hi* in "Tsukihi" (月火) are both written with the kanji 火 ("fire").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> This time, it's written in katakana with フェブラリー (*feburarii*).

"Don't say that my little sisters are strange. They will torture you to death."

"Torture me to death? That's the kind of retort a middle schooler would say, don't you think?"

"There were times when I was uncomfortable with my name, wondering why I was given such a stupid name."

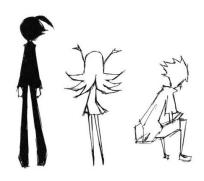
"The right for someone to name his children. On one hand, it's truly a powerful privilege. On the other hand, I think that trying to do fortune-telling based on the writing of one's name is kind of excessive. Even if the fortune-telling turns out really bad."

"In the end, it can happen that, after receiving your name, you realize that it's not the one you wanted. But any complaint you might have is worthless. Nevertheless, there is something that I truly want to say."

"OK, let's hear it."

"It's better when you decide by yourself. I have reached the age of discretion and thus I want to be known from now on as *Araragi February Koyomi*."

"Isn't your name Kisaragi-san?"



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